

**Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent  
RCL Lectionary, Year C**

[Isaiah 43:16-21](#) / [Psalm 126](#) / [Philippians 3:4b-14](#) / [John 12:1-8](#)

**March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2010**

**The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour  
Mill Valley, California**

**Heads in the Sand**

**by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer**

The author of John really hangs the offense at Mary's lavishly over-the-top action today around Judas' neck – seeming to overload the argument with the accusation that Judas was a thief, stealing out of disciples' common purse. Maybe the author pushes the case against Judas hard because there's something uncomfortably familiar about Judas' words and perspective, something uncomfortably like a mirror in his reaction to Mary's outrageously expensive act. 300 denarii, the value of the jar of ointment, was worth one year's wages for a regular worker of the time, after all. It would be akin these days to buying Jesus a six-figure high-end sports car or setting him a lavish catered dinner at the Outdoor Art Club. Would we be offended if such an act were planned? Of course we would be, just like Judas.

Judas' words reflect our own judgments about the way things should be in the world, and, indeed, the church. How we expect things ought to be and with some good reason – our own thievery aside. We have to wonder regularly if our operating budget leans too heavily on maintaining an institution, from staff salaries to upkeep, and whether or not we allocate enough to serve the poor. We have to wonder from time to time if lavish liturgy – the rough equivalent of our regularly breaking an expensive jar of ointment over Jesus' feet to honor his work among us – is a scandal when there are people who appear regularly at Camino Alto and East Blithedale begging for a few dollars just to eat their next meal.

The question before us this day is the question that hits Judas straight between the eyes. Is this Jesus who accepts such a lavish gift the Messiah we expect? Maybe not. Judas' expectations are so poorly met by Jesus' actions that Judas takes great offense – so great an offense that he is drawn headlong into acts of betrayal infamous in the Christian tradition. But who felt betrayed first? Honestly, I think Judas did. As we all do when our God in Christ fails to meet our expectations; When our prayers don't get answered the way we want them; When Jesus fails to show up the way we think we need him; When our best and most loving plans wander into chaos or down dead-end alleys; When our expectations of even those we most dearly love are uprooted by the harsh realities of disappointment, failure, and betrayal.

It reminds me of learning recently that one definition of expectation is “planned resentment!” I carry that teaching around with me every day, and quote it probably more often than necessary. When disappointment and betrayal come knocking, which they do, this teaching is a touchstone that reminds me I am not in charge, and I most certainly am not God.

As a Christian community, we are about to run headlong into the climax of Lent. With Holy Week around the corner, our expectations about what should be are about to meet what will be in the cross. All the disciples will follow after Judas in their own way. Peter will deny Jesus three times. Others will simply run silently and hide out of fear as Jesus, along with every expectation of what a Messiah should be, is hung up to die.

It is Mary of Bethany, oddly enough, who is remembered among the ranks of the faithful, faithful as she is to this fragile savior who offered her wisdom in the midst of a capricious and unpredictable life, who raised her brother from death when all hope was gone. This Mary who threw all caution to the winds and gave her most expensive gift to this man who is about to die. This Mary who would be laughed off Wall Street, Main Street, and perhaps even out of our pews at times for her lack of proportioned reasoning or her impoverished management of risk; Who scandalizes every conceivable expectation that we might have about the way rational followers of Jesus are *supposed* to behave.

The poetry of the prophet Isaiah this morning talks about hyenas and ostriches – strange images of the deserts of our souls where laughing cynicism can rule and we are tempted to stick our heads in the sand. For it is our mysterious and often inscrutable God who says, “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” And that new thing will defy every possible expectation that we have. Our lack of perception is in part about unmet expectations, unanticipated turns in the road of life, the unplanned contingencies of our fragile humanity.

Oddly enough, this is what Mary blesses with her scandalously lavish act in today’s Gospel. It is what we bless each Sunday as we gather to break open the fragrant vessels of our expensive hearts over the Lord’s feet. . . As we honor his saving grace, though we can scarcely understand it except in hindsight, by only looking backwards over the experiences of our meandering, unpredictable lives.

Jesus asks his most intimate disciples and us, his followers, to set aside our narrow expectations about the way we think things should be, and instead embrace the abundance of God’s grace given to us in the way of the cross. To hold our concepts of order lightly while we embrace the ironies of a God who gives up life so that all may have it; Who defeats death by dying; Who overturns evil by capitulating to it; Who upends poverty by scandalizing the prosperous; Who subverts oppression by humbly offering self as servant, as slave; Who brings new life not to the carefully planned but to where there is sacrifice and offering, transformation where ordinary water is sprinkled, wholeness where hearts are broken like bread, a new family where a cup is shared amongst strangers.

It is near the end of the Lent. Time to take our heads out of the desert sands of our expectations and perceive that our God of life is indeed about to do a new thing in our midst.