

Message for Sunday, March 25, 2023
 The Rev. Michael Burke
 Preached at St. Mary's Episcopal Church
 Anchorage, Alaska

Good morning.

I have to share with you, I have a lot of delight in the Scripture passages appointed for today. They are so full of meaning and rich with symbolism that we can only scratch the service of what is there.

Our first reading was from the famous passage from Ezekiel, the Valley of Dry Bones. Because it is placed in the lectionary on the fifth or last Sunday of Lent, we often hear it as foreshadowing the resurrection of Easter morning. But it is far more than that.

Yesterday, I wrote an entire sermon based on that text.

You may hear it sometime soon, but you will not hear it today.

In TV land, that's what they call "a teaser."

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Instead, let us do something that is actually quite short and pointed.

Let us look to the Gospel for today:

In John's Gospel, in three successive weeks, we have **heard three startling things:**

Throughout the first portion of John's Gospel, Jesus's identity is carefully hidden. John uses themes of light and darkness, things seen and unseen, and through it all the true identity and purpose of Jesus is hidden.

And then: Three weeks ago, in John Chapter 4: Jesus reveals himself to the Syrophonecian woman at the well as *the Messiah, the anointed one of God.*

After the woman says to Jesus, 'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ), Jesus said to her, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.'" (John 4:26).

Not to the religious leaders, not to the Roman Empire, not to even his closest disciples, but to this woman, who the culture and community shamed and thought to be filled with sin, he reveals the hidden Messianic secret. He reveals his true, innermost Self. His most sacred calling from God.

Then last week, in the 9th chapter of John, we heard of a man said to be “born blind.” Outcast, separated out and shamed by the community as one who they claimed bore sin,

Every day of his life, he had felt there unspoken judgement. Even the disciples of Jesus, those good religious followers, asked Jesus, “Who sinned, this man or his parents?”

And Jesus said: “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.”

Later, after Jesus heard that they had driven the man out, and when he found him, he said, ‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’ The man described as “having been born blind” soon sees what others simply cannot see. He answered, ‘And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.’ Jesus said to him, ‘You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.’ The man said, ‘Lord, I believe.’

Still, no one else knows Jesus most intimate secret, but these that others would exclude and shame. Those who would have no place of welcome in “proper company” and in any conventional religious assembly.

And now today, in the face of the excruciating loss of her brother, in a story that raises far more questions than it answers,

Jesus says to Martha, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?’ and Martha says to him, ‘**Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.**’

On the lips of a woman deep in grief, the messianic secret is spoken.

Martha knows.

Martha speaks aloud what others cannot hear.

How different this is than in what scholars call the “Synoptic” Gospels: those according to Mark, Matthew, and Luke, in which it is Peter who first says “You are the Christ, the Messiah, which means “anointed one.”

But here in John’s Gospel, it is recorded plainly:

A foreign woman the world has shamed

A man excluded from community and blamed for his own situation in life

A sister deep n grief.

These are the ones who know. These are the ones to whom Jesus quietly reveals what is still hidden from others.

Revealed to the ones at the margins, not the center. Not to the privileged. Not to those in the spotlight. Not to those with 10 million followers on Instagram.

But to the people whom the world renders invisible.

Why, you might ask, for sixty five years, has this little community of St. Mary's opened in hearts and doors, in its own very imperfect way, to those whom the world would shame, marginalize, and exclude?

Have we no concern about the trouble that might invite?

Have we no concern for our safety?

Have we no regard for our fine reputation?

Four weeks ago, we also heard, in the third chapter of John, of Nicodemus, one with great wealth, prestige, and position. A good and humble man, he came earnestly seeking the light. He did not understand. He had more questions than answers.

He was still in the early stages of what he too, would eventually come to know and understand.

But pay attention to the story John tells:

Nicodemus would lay all that power and position down when the truth dawned upon him, of the reality of God's work in Jesus. He would take his place among those whom the world does not understand.

He would seemingly lose everything to gain his soul.

Sometimes the Gospel is hidden among us in plain sight.

Let those who have eyes see, and those who have ears listen.

For there is hope for us all, my friends.

There is hope for us all.