

Title: Mapping Our Interior

Date: 4/3/2022 (Lent 5, Year C)

Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church

Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)

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

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/XDGs4kHfNSE?t=1048>

O God, Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found. (Collect of the Day, Lent 5, Year C)

Amen.

Please be seated.

If this prayer sounds familiar, that's because the words are from the Collect of the Day we prayed at the beginning of today's service. The word "collect" is spelled exactly the same as the word collect. This form of prayer aims to be both broad enough to encompass all kinds of petitions and specific enough that we can fill in our own examples.

For example, there have been so many swift and varied changes in the world these last months, and between all of us here we can probably name as many changes that concern us as there are people in this room and online. This prayer aims to collect all of our cares and concerns into one single prayer that we can lift up to God, together.

There is usually a theme to each collect. The theme for the Collect of the Day is often connected to the readings of the day or the season of the church year. This collect about the swift and varied changes in the world feels appropriate not only for today's readings and for today being the last Sunday of Lent. It also feels appropriate in response to everything happening here at St. Alban's, having said goodbye to an interim rector last Sunday and hello to a new rector today, and to everything happening in this city, this country, and this world.

Change is hard, even when change is good. So, as we face all these changes, as things feel a little less steady and a little more wobbly, how do we find a way for our hearts to be fixed where true joys are to be found?

In the context of the church year, I think of Lent as the time to prepare the soil that is our hearts and minds and souls for the seeds we sow in spring, during the season of Easter. When we have prepared the soil, it's more likely for these seeds to grow and flourish during the green season of Ordinary Time.

What are these seeds?

They may be words inspired by the Holy Spirit and recorded in Scripture. The teachings and examples of the Word of God, Jesus Christ. The thoughts, words and deeds of our fellow members in the Body of Christ. Even as we hear these words or see them in

action, there are obstacles within and around us that keep those words from taking root in us. So, whether our Lenten practice is to take on something or give up something, the goal is to remove those obstacles.

This year, my Lenten practice is doing morning pages. In Julia Cameron's book, *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*, she explains, "[Morning pages] are a trail that we follow into our own interior, where we meet both our own creativity and our creator. Morning pages map our own interior...Using them, the light of insight is coupled with the power for expansive change."¹

Every morning, I don't stop until I've written three pages by hand. This is stream-of-consciousness writing with no editing, no judgment, no censoring. This is three pages of me responding to "the swift and varied changes of the world." This is me, vulnerable, unedited, imperfect and given my handwriting, messy. So. So. SO. Messy. That's one reason that I haven't gone back to read and synthesize what I wrote.

Another reason is that the point of this spiritual practice isn't to hold on to those thoughts and feelings. The point is to practice getting them out in the open, to map out the obstacles in my interior. Once these thoughts and feelings are on the page, I can more easily find a way through or around them.

Doing Morning Pages brings to light old habits and old patterns of feeling and thinking that arise in response to all these changes that are happening, which in turn keeps me from "be[ing] fixed where true joys are to be found."

Logically, the question of the day is, "So, where are true joys to be found?"

Looking at today's readings, it appears that using the word "fix" in today's Collect of the Day is paradoxical. To be fixed where true joys are to be found is to be fixed on a moving target. It is to be fixed on a God that is too big to remain within our expectations, a God that is always, ALWAYS, pointing toward, if not doing, something new.

From the book of the Prophet Isaiah, today we heard, "Thus says the Lord...Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (Isa 43:16, 18-19).

To be clear, old things aren't by definition bad things. Before God tells the people of Israel about the new things that are in store for them, God reminds them of the Exodus. As the Israelites left Egypt, God made a way for them in the sea, a path in the mighty waters. And now, as the Israelites are returning from their exile in Babylon, God is going to do something different. God is going to make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

So, if they fix their eyes on the past and expect God to do the **exact same thing**, if they keep looking toward the sea, they will miss what God is doing now. Again, old things

aren't bad by default, but they may get in the way of perceiving the new things that God is doing.

At the same time, being aware of old things can help us perceive new things. Our God is constantly turning our expectations upside down. In a world ordered by God, barren women become pregnant and younger sons are chosen over the eldest. A poor young woman can become the bearer of God, and death is followed by life.

Based on past experience, we think things should be a certain way, or should work a certain way, and God says, "Wait a second," or as some say these days, "Hold my beer."

In Paul's letter to the Philippians, he writes, "Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ" (Phil 3:7). The status Paul was born to, the zeal he was taught to exhibit, the works of the law he was proud to do, all of that were supposed to help him gain a lead on others in the race of life. Yet, after he decided to follow Jesus, he has come to regard all of that as a deficit. He came to consider his status, his zeal and his work of the law as rubbish, his words. Knowing that his salvation comes from Christ and not by virtue of his own efforts or his own birth, he chooses to "[forget] what lies behind and [strains] forward to what lies ahead (Phil 3:13).

Instead of being fixed on who he has been and what he has done, he is on the move; he is fixed on transformation.

In the Gospel according to John, Judas criticizes Mary's extravagance. She has anointed Jesus' feet with a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard. A pound of nard cost 300 denarii, the equivalent of what an average laborer would have made in a year.² Having heard Jesus' teachings, Judas thought he could make Mary look bad by pointing out, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (Jn 12:5).

Jesus turns Judas' expectations upside down by disagreeing with him. "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." (Jn 12:7-8). Judas was fixed on what came before. He was looking backwards and holding on to old things, so he couldn't perceive the new thing that was happening as Jesus stood on the doorstep of death and resurrection.

This is the challenge and the gift of following Jesus. Jesus is all about getting us to do things we haven't done, getting us to see things from a new angle. This can be frustrating because oftentimes we just want to know we're all good. We want to know we've done or believed the 3.75 things that will guarantee our salvation, or at the very least, our self-image as a good person leading a good life. Yet Jesus is constantly calling us to the work of transformation, transforming ourselves, transforming our relationships, and transforming the world around us.

As we engage in the work of transformation, we may run up against resistance in ourselves and in those around us. It won't be possible to work through or around these obstacles unless we can put them on the page and map them out.

That begins with recognizing what we become fixed on in response to the swift and varied changes of the world. Are we fixed on what lies behind, or are we fixed on straining toward what lies ahead? Are we fixed on old expectations, or are we fixed on the new things God is doing with those old things? One way leads to loss, and the other leads to true joy.

May we grow ever more aware of the obstacles that keep the words of God from taking root in our hearts May we come to embody those words in and through each of our bodies, and together as the body of Christ, for our neighbors and throughout our city.

Amen.

¹ Cameron, Julia. *The Artist's Way*. p15

² Footnote for Mk 14.5. The Harper Collins Study Bible. p1752