



Isaiah 43:16-21
John 12:1-8

43:16-21

¹⁶Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, ¹⁷who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: ¹⁸Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. ¹⁹I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. ²⁰The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, ²¹the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

John 12:1-11

¹²Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ²There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵"Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" ⁶(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) ⁷Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." ⁹When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ¹⁰So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, ¹¹since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

Through the Valley of the Shadow

Walter "Stitch" Carmichael graduated near the top of his medical class at UNM and he could have gone anywhere in the country to practice General Medicine. But he decided to take over Doc Vigil's practice in Magdalena because he preferred the pace of his hometown and he knew he'd be needed. It made his mother proud, too, and that was something.

She was the one who'd given him the nickname "Stitch" when he was eight years old because he was always making off with her needle and thread.

She'd watch him play doctor all by himself pretending to sew up wounds in the old ragged stuffed dog he'd had since he was a baby.

His father had been crushed beneath his tractor when Walter was seven

and Walter had been morbidly fascinated by the stitches across his father's face and chest as the man lay motionless in his bed.

His father lingered two weeks before succumbing to infection.

Stitch's mother worried he she couldn't do enough for him to make up for the loss.

It astonished her how well he did – making friends, never causing a moment's trouble.

He was a star student and he learned to play the cello just to be different.

Stitch could barely remember his mother now that he was nearing eighty.

She died of pneumonia at age fifty-seven despite all he tried to do for her.

He'd saved others but had failed to save the one he most cared about.

It haunted him still after all these years.

Friends, the ones still alive, anyway, kept telling him he should retire,

that he should do something fun for a change, do some traveling while he was still able.

But medicine was fun. It was deeply satisfying for him in a way nothing else was.

Besides, he wasn't as able as they imagined. He was, in fact, dying.

He had diagnosed the disease himself – he knew the symptoms well enough – loss of appetite, weakness, especially in the legs, kidney dysfunction.

It was multiple myeloma - cancer of the blood plasma.

He hadn't told anyone. Who would he tell? He didn't want a fuss.

He'd have kept his secret had Mary Gonzalez not found him sitting in a state of confusion

when she took her son Leo by to get his physical to play his last year of high school ball.

Stitch was dehydrated and when Mary went by to see him in the hospital later

she badgered him, refusing to accept his vague excuses, until he spilled the beans.

Mary was devastated. She believed Stitch was the only reason Leo was alive.

At age ten the boy had come down with bacterial meningitis.

Stitch was the one who diagnosed it quickly and saw Leo got the best medical care.

It was touch and go, but the boy pulled through

with hearing loss in his left ear the only lingering effect.

Stitch swore Mary to secrecy and she made him promise to cut back on his schedule,

but she knew it was a promise he would have difficulty keeping.

That night in her own room Mary cried for half an hour

but then she dried her tears and came up with a plan.

Part of her plan was that she would host a dinner party in Stitch's honor.

No one would have to know of his illness.

A party to honor him was long overdue.

She would invite some of his patients, including the mayor.

It would be fun and upbeat!

It wouldn't be easy getting Aunt Frieda and Uncle Cosmo to go along.

For the one-millionth time Mary regretted the control they exercised over her life – control she too easily gave them.

But they had given her and Leo a place to live after the divorce

and they helped make up the gap when child support payments didn't arrive,

and they never let her forget it.

They insisted on managing her bank account since she was hopeless at such things

(or so they told her).

She often wondered why she couldn't seem to build much in savings

but they deflected any questions with technical jargon that made her head spin.

She gave them most of her paycheck, but kept back a little each pay period

they didn't know about.

As for the party, for once she would insist.

And she would promise to do all the laundry for a month.

Stitch didn't know about any party.

All he knew was that he'd been invited to dinner by Mary and Leo.

Leo would pick him up at six.

He was tired after even a short day seeing no more than five patients.

Part of him just wanted to go to bed early.

But part of him was looking forward to a break in his routine.

He showered and shaved, sitting down on the toilet seat to rest only twice.

He put on his signature straw hat and bow tie and greeted Leo warmly

then kidded him about the rusted out '96 Dodge Neon the boy drove.

"Hey Old Man," Leo said, "At least she's paid for!"

They grinned at one another with mutual affection.

Since Frieda and Cosmo's house was next to the Dollar Store

all the guests could park in the Dollar Store parking lot without tipping Stitch off.

He followed Leo in the door and nearly collapsed when everyone jumped out at once.

Without a word of welcome Cosmo snatched the bottle of wine out of his hand

and Frieda arched her eyebrow and curled her lip in mild disgust

when Mary hugged Stitch hard.

It was a fine dinner, though corners were cut.

No one complained because Cosmo and Frieda's stinginess was legendary.

They knew it wasn't Mary's doing.

Oreos from the package was dessert but at least there was coffee after.

When the coffee had been served Mary got everyone's attention

and went and kneeled before Stitch as he sat in the wingback chair of honor.

Color crept up Stitch's neck into his face.

Tears welled in Mary's eyes but she checked them with determination.

She would get through this.

"We all wanted to be here," Mary croaked, "Because you've meant so much to all of us."

Stitch cleared his throat and squirmed.

"You may not think anyone pays attention to what you do for this community every day,

but each person here could tell a story of how you've made a difference.

Nothing could repay you for that. Nothing.

But I do have a gift for you and you have no option except to receive it graciously."

Stitch held up a hand and started to protest.

"Shut up!" Mary said gently.

Pulling an envelope from her back pocket she said,

"I've known you since before Leo was born and for all that time

I've heard you talk about two things:

wishing you could hear Yo Yo Ma play the cello

and fantasizing about what it would be like to play in Carnegie Hall.

So, here is a non-refundable, non-exchangeable first class plane ticket to New York City.

You have a reservation for three nights at the Four Seasons hotel in Manhattan.

On Saturday night a limo will pick you up at 6:00 p.m.

to take you to dinner at Carmine's with old friends of mine and then to Carnegie Hall

where you will have a first tier, center seat to see Yo Yo Ma in concert.

And you will be invited backstage to meet the artist afterward.

Stitch sat stunned, moved beyond words.

He couldn't begin to imagine how much all of this cost,

but he could see in Mary's eyes that all he could do or should do was say, "Thank you."
A tear formed in the corner of his right eye.

She put her head on his knee. The room was silent.

Silent that is until Cosmo and Frieda started to sputter.

"But...But...that must cost a fortune! Where did you get money like that?"

"That...that...money could be used to send Leo to college!"

Mary lifted her head and smiled, fully aware of the real reason for their protest.

"if it wasn't for Stitch," Mary said quietly. "Leo wouldn't be here to go to college."

"Yes," Stitch started to say with comic bravado, "If it wasn't for me..."

but then he looked at Leo, choked up, put his face in his hands and wept.

As if on cue, the guests crowded in to touch Stitch in solidarity
wherever each one could find an open spot.

None of them sure exactly what was going on,

but each aware that, whatever it was, it was profound.

Death is very present in Bethany that night when Jesus has dinner with his friends.

Lazarus sits right there beside Jesus only days after Jesus led him out of a tomb
wrapped in a burial cloth, already stinking of decay.

Jerusalem is only two miles away

and death threats are being made openly against both Jesus and Lazarus
by Jewish authorities who feel their power threatened
by this country healer and his exhibit A miracle man.

Even within their ranks there is one who is rumored to be a thief

though perhaps no one but Jesus knows the true extent of Judas' betrayal.

As they sit together in the home of Lazarus and Martha and Mary
events follow their predictable course.

Martha serves the meal and refills the wine cups

while Mary brings in an exorbitantly extravagant pound of precious nard,
cups it in her hands and spills it over Jesus' feet with scandalous intimacy.

It is a sweet, overpowering fragrance that reminds them all of death,

because it is a common oil used to cover the stink of death. A little goes a long way.

Judas objects to the expense and regrets not being able to get his hands on the money.

Jesus takes up for Mary and says she bought it for the occasion of his burial.

So why didn't Mary save it for his burial? Why waste it now?

Because life is not always about economics and extravagant love is never wasted.

The pilgrim's journey is not always about getting from point A to point B expediently.

Even when you find yourself walking through the valley of the shadow of death,

or maybe *especially* when you find yourself there,

you might as well choose to do the extravagant thing;
the outrageous, intimately loving thing.

Yes, it is true. The poor will always be with us,

but when adoration is called for you don't stop to count your pennies.

You live in the moment, you do the unexpected

and sometimes that is enough to clear a new path, to part the sea,

to hold the universe upside down by its ankles and shake it, SHAKE IT!

until a new thing springs forth

and it becomes clear that death never did have the last word.