In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

“Mary 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.”

We have heard versions of this story before, in the other gospels. But John puts a totally different spin on it, by equating the woman with Mary of Bethany, Martha and Lazarus’ little sister. John wants to tell us a different story.

Mary has the first century equivalent of a bottle of real French perfume. Nard was a highly refined, very fragrant oil that was made into a semi-solid ointment, sold in small quantities. Body heat would melt it. Some of the wealthy would place a small amount of it on the tops of their heads, where it would slowly melt and perfume their hair, then gradually drip downward until it covered their skin with a fine glaze of scent. It marked the wearer as someone rich and powerful -- someone, most likely, who had a slave to wash their feet, which were inevitably dirty and dusty after walking through unpaved paths and streets.

Mary of Bethany, Lazarus’ sister, shocks everyone by anointing Jesus’ feet with very expensive nard. What on earth is she up to? A respectable woman did not interrupt the men reclining around the dinner table, much less uncover her head, undo her hair, and wipe a guest’s feet like a slave.

But let’s stop and think about what may be going on here. This is not just any Mary. It’s Mary who has sat and listened to Jesus for hour upon hour, even to the point of earning Martha’s rebuke. This is Mary of Bethany, who was summoned by Jesus to see him call Lazarus out of the tomb. She saw Jesus weep. She heard him call. She saw her brother emerge. Mary may well understand that the Messiah, the Anointed One, will indeed have to face death, yet will triumph over death. You see, Mary listened to everything Jesus had said.
My guess is, that the table talk at this dinner revolved around Jesus’ decision to go to Jerusalem for Passover. There may well have been discussion about the danger in it for him and his disciples. There they might well be arrested by the Romans or the Temple authorities for breach of peace or blasphemy if Jesus continues to preach and teach the new Way of God’s Kingdom on earth.

Mary listened, realizing with horror that death was a growing and imminent likelihood for her beloved Teacher. She also knew that only the Roman authorities could execute people, and no matter what terrible method they used, Jesus’ body was not likely to receive the washing and anointing it would have received during a proper Jewish internment.

Little Mary, a realist for all her sitting and listening, accepted the changes that Jesus and the other men talked about. She had seen her brother Lazarus walk out of his tomb. If the Messiah, the Anointed One, required his anointing, so be it.

So she went to her bedroom and got her expensive perfume. She unwrapped her hair, and turned herself into a servant, as she washed Jesus’ feet with the perfume. She brought her best and most valuable gifts to the table, and offered them humbly and freely to Jesus. And Jesus understood and accepted them.

Mary has a special lesson to teach us in these eventful times of ours. Change is upon us from every direction – both the changes we choose and the ones we might not have chosen. Here at St. Paul’s on the Fifth Sunday of Lent, we look toward Holy Week with its annual remembrance of Jesus’ passion, death and resurrection. We watch the arrival of spring and the departure of our winter birds – well, I think the juncos (the ones Philadelphians call snow birds) had better leave soon!

We wait for 5G technology to arrive and we meet the new robot in the Flourtown Giant store. We watch social media molting and Cliff keeps reminding us that he will retire in a few weeks. Joseph and his wife are expecting their second child – and then they will leave us.

It seems that we now live with non-stop change. Most of us intensely dislike change when it affects the things we are used to and prefer – human nature doesn’t change, but life does! Even 244 years ago, the Declaration of Independence noted that:
“...all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed."

Mary offers us a faith-filled challenge. Will we accept change and bring our best gifts and selves to the table? Will we send Amy and Cliff on their way next month with best wishes for many wonderful retirement years? Will we humbly offer the very best we have to our Interim Rector, our Vestry and the Search Committee who will be formed? They will need our support and gifts as we pass through this time of change.

Or will we be like Judas, counting each coin and begrudging each gift, remembering only ourselves and perhaps our friends, and not the larger gift of Jesus who is facing the ultimate sacrifice? Mary and Judas remind us that we always have a choice when change is upon us. We can bring our best – or our worst – to the table. We can offer what we have with grace and love, or we can complain and create unease. Will we trust in God’s plan – even when it means death on a cross – and play our parts well in the unfolding drama, secure in our knowledge of Jesus’ and our resurrection?

Be of good hope, dear friends, as we begin the closing weeks of Lent, the coming of spring and resurrection, and new life. The butterfly does not weep for the caterpillar; the flower does not weep for the seed.

Remember the words of the prophet Isaiah:

“Thus says the Lord...Do not remember the things of old. I 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.....I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.”

Amen.