A grand dinner to celebrate Lazarus’s return from the dead. … And all the players are there – Jesus – his disciples – Lazarus, and his sisters Mary and Martha, and other invited guests. In the ancient world, big meals were often connected to death – meals where family and other loved ones could gather to commemorate the departed – like we come together in the Session House after a funeral. In fact, many wealthy Romans actually had eating chambers installed at their graves, to give people a place to hold their funeral meal. +++ So, on the surface, there’s nothing very unusual about having the dinner. But by the time we have this dinner for Lazarus’s non-death – his resurrection – the line between Life and Death doesn’t seem quite so uncrossable anymore. There’s tension in the air – and the images of Life and Death add to our sense of bewilderment. In the previous chapter, any questions about Jesus’ power over death were answered – when we were graphically confronted by the smell of death and the sight of Lazarus, slowly emerging after two days in his tomb – emerging with his hands and feet – and face – still wrapped in cloth… - looking as much like a mummy as a man. +++ And just one week from now, Jesus will have his own Last Supper, in many ways like this one. +++ +++ But there’s a lot more going on here – at this dinner party – than we might notice at first - schemes and plots – innocence and guilt – truth and deception – power and weakness – the BEST and the worst in people. +++ I think it helps us understand what’s happening here to go back to the previous chapter to get our bearings.

When Jesus learned that Lazarus was gravely ill he waited two days to come to him, knowing what that would mean. His delay leads to tension between him and his friends that carries through the entire story. After he arrives, Martha complains, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Jesus responds: “I am the resurrection AND the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live” – then Martha proclaims that Jesus is “the Messiah, the Son of God.” +++ Next, her sister Mary comes out and kneels at his feet but says the same thing, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” +++ Clearly – they believe Jesus has power – they believe he loves them and their brother Lazarus – but they blame him. He should have come earlier. +++ It’s all too much for Mary, Martha and the Jews who were with them to handle – their grief for Lazarus and this potent, confusing, fusion of life and death – love and failure – blame and innocence – +++ faith and doubt – it was all too much for them – they wept – they all wept – and even Jesus was “greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.” +++ And he wept, as well. +++ But even Jesus’ tears had been misconstrued and interpreted in conflicting ways, with some saying, “See how he loved him!,” while others complained that anyone who had “opened the eyes of the blind man” could have saved Lazarus from dying… IF he had chosen to. +++ So, early in the story, we already see people at their BEST (showing clear faith in Jesus) – but also at their WORST (blaming Jesus for not doing what they wanted him to do when they wanted him to do it).+++ Then, Jesus raises the stakes in this great life-and-death conflict raising Lazarus from the dead after two days in the tomb. +++ As we might expect, the conflict – the contradiction – rises accordingly – it becomes a matter of life and death. The voices that questioned Jesus’ motives now call for his death – including the voices of the High Priest Caiaphas and the Pharisees. They put the word out on the street to let them know if anyone sees Jesus, so they could arrest him. And Jesus disappears into hiding with his disciples in a town on the edge of the wilderness, to let things cool down. +++

Yes – ALL of that happened just in the previous chapter. When Christ’s power even over death was revealed, things got very serious very quickly. Now, Passover is approaching – and it seems all the talk in the temple is about Jesus – will he dare to show his face at the festival?? If he does, will the Priests and Pharisees really follow through on their threats?? – +++ The stage is set – Jesus Christ and his enemies – ready to face off like the proverbial immovable object and an unstoppable force. What will happen when they meet?

But now – between those two great events – those divisive and decisive events of raising Lazarus’s resurrection and Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem… +++ … comes this unexpected,… domestic… worshipful… touching scene,
when Jesus returns to Lazarus’s home for a dinner, on his way to Jerusalem. +++ It’s a busy scene. Jesus, his disciples, Lazarus, and other invited guests are all there. Martha is busy serving everyone. +++ But even with so many in the room – even with all the conversations and people going in and out – … all of that grows quiet for us and fades into the background, as our attention is drawn to an intimate moment of tenderness. Mary anoints Jesus’ feet and wipes them gently with her hair, using perfume made from pure nard worth a year’s wages. +++ +++ +++ But even here, conflict has wormed its way into Jesus’ closest companions – almost spoiling Mary’s gesture, when Judas challenges her for wasting such valuable perfume that could have been sold and used to feed the poor. +++ +++ Until Jesus intervenes to restore the moment:: “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.” +++ Yes – we do feed the poor. The Lord does side with the weak – stands up to the mighty – and will continue to do so forever. We’ve seen that… We know that… +++ But this moment is different… God is about to do a NEW THING through Christ… THE BEST is yet to come – and Christ welcomes Mary’s gesture – she’s giving him Only The Best of what she has to offer – her tender love, devotion, and faith. +++ But, in this same moment – when Christ is asking for our best – we learn that Judas steals from Jesus and is going to betray him. +++ The best in us – and the worst in us – still occupying the same space – still vying to define us – even within our own homes – our own families – our own hearts – … – We are just as conflicted sharing a private moment – a meal – with Christ as we are “out there”… where the jeering crowds gather and the powerful have their say. +++ How can begin offering Only The Best to Christ – and leave our Worst behind?

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Our Old Testament reading also takes place just before another great decisive act of God. After 70 years of exile in Babylon – ((so long the people no longer remember their homeland – they don’t even know what Jerusalem looks like except through stories)) – after all that time, the Lord is ready to do something new for them:: bring them home – back to the Promised Land – back to rebuild the broken Temple in Jerusalem. --- And yes, Isaiah writes, this IS the same Lord who has always given us ONLY THE BEST – who delivered us from bondage in Egypt – who cleared a path for us through the sea – who wiped out the army that pursued us. Yes – you know that… But this moment is different… “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old,” the Lord says, “I am about to do a new thing, now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”” … THE BEST is yet to come – and the innocent wild animals will respond with their best… “The jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert.” +++ And like Christ asking for our best before he gives us his best by entering Jerusalem and laying down his life for us – the Lord reminds us here in Isaiah that the “rivers in the desert [are] to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.” +++ Praising God is what we are created to do. +++

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Yes – we are called to maneuver our way the best we can through a complex world. We are called to stand up for social justice, feed the poor, and reach out to the world in mission – to comfort each other in times of loss. All of that will always be there – and we should strive to do more – to follow Christ’s example more closely. We should challenge our own motivations – question how fair and kind and forgiving we are to our families and friends. +++ The best and the worst of the world swirl around us everyday, don’t they? And, they swirl around together within us, as well. +++ But to be at our BEST – we have to watch – and expect – that the Lord will do a NEW THING for us and within us. +++ +++ To be YOUR BEST – stop and take a breath, at least a few times a day – share an intimate moment with Christ – anoint his feet – and wipe them with your hair. +++ Walk by Christ’s side through these last two weeks of Lent. +++ Be arrested with him – be convicted with him – die with him – and be resurrected, leaving your worst behind with your old self. +++ Enter a new day – …the new age – …the Kingdom of God – with Only… Your Best.

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