

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt
Fifth Sunday in Lent - Year C
St. Paul's Lutheran Church
Isaiah 43:16-21
Psalm 126
Philippians 3:4b-14
John 12:1-8
04/03/2022

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. John:

1Six 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.”

The Gospel of Our Lord

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

A King or a Corpse?

Good morning! We have a problem. (Well, actually we have two problems. The first of which is that we have three absolutely amazing biblical texts and I am forced to pick one to preach on, because as a professor in seminary said, “rather than do three sermons poorly, do one sermon deeply.”) But besides that, we need to make a decision about the Gospel lesson. And the decision relates to why Mary anoints Jesus. She used nard, which was “*an herb that grows in the Himalayan countries of Bhutan, Nepal, and Kashmir in India. The fragrant root and lower stems were dried and used to concoct a perfumed ointment... Nard has an intense, warm, musky odor that is described as an erotic perfume in Song of Songs 1:12-13.*”¹ But nard was also used for burial. Before our modern day practices of embalming and refrigeration, the dead were packed with expensive perfumes and other things that smelled nice so that they could mask the odor. (Have you ever wondered why we buy so many flowers for someone when a loved one dies? That’s why!) Which brings us to our decision. Is Jesus being prepared for his burial or is he being crowned the king, or messiah? Because we know that Jesus is the messiah, we tend to assume that the title is more religious, but the messiah was just the term that Israel had for king. In fact, the word literally means anointed one. A professor in undergrad would translate it as “one who was smothered in oil” which was how Israel “crowned” their king.

So, listen to these two quotes from well respected biblical scholars. Allen Dwight Callahan writes that “*Mary is not embalming Jesus. That would be premature: Jesus, after all, is not yet dead. She is not anointing him for burial. She is anointing him for something else... The narrative*

¹ *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible. Volume II.* Edited by Katharine Doob Sakenfeld. 5 vols. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009. p. 222.

sequence of the Gospel of John shows Mary's anointing of Jesus to be what it had been in Israel for more than a millennium — a coronation."² Our next quote is from Francis J. Moloney who writes "[Jesus] then explains the anointing: 'the purpose was that she might keep this for the day of preparation for my burial.' The day of his presence at the table with Lazarus is the day of preparation for the burial of Jesus. Mary's actions prepares for the death of Jesus."³ Moloney then quotes another scholar who writes "the reader is invited to see in Mary's action a symbolic embalming of His body for burial, as though he were already dead."⁴

Well... which one is it? Another scholar writes "Does John wish to feature Jesus' anointing as the Messiah? It would seem so..."⁵ but then one sentence later writes "It is not clear why John has Mary anoint Jesus' feet as in Luke and not his head as in Mark, except perhaps to avoid implications of messianism."⁶ Scholars... make up your minds!

Before we can dive back into the particulars, we need to address verse 8. It's always dangerous to quote one verse of scripture, because the context matters so much to how it's understood. Jesus said "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." And for the next 2,000 years people have used this quote to justify their lack of empathy and support for the poor. But Jesus is actually quoting Deuteronomy 15:11 in the Hebrew Scriptures. One scholar writes that "it has paradoxically become a watchword of callousness. In its context in Deuteronomy it is followed by: 'Therefore I command you, you shall open wide your hand to

² Blount, Brian K., et al. *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007. pp. 200-201.

³ Moloney, Francis J., and Daniel J. Harrington. *The Gospel of John*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1998. p. 349.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Sloyan, Gerard S. *John*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. p. 153.

⁶ Ibid.

your brother, to the needy and the poor, in the land.” That certainly changes things, doesn’t it?

But back to the question on the floor. What is the purpose of the anointing? Let's look again at the points the scholars above have made. Callahan argues that it is a coronation and this has a lot going for it. For the past three years Jesus has been doing ministry throughout Israel, challenging the status quo, and talking about how a new age is coming. He then heads towards Jerusalem, the seat of power for all kings of Israel. He does this before the Passover, THE central religious festival for the Jewish people that celebrates their freedom from slavery.

On the other hand, Moloney has argued that it’s for burial. Even Jesus says that *“she bought it that she might keep it for the day of my burial.”* BUT I would argue that Jesus is referring to the nard that is left over AFTER the anointing. The detail that complicates matters is the anointing of Jesus’ feet. When a guest was welcomed into a home it was customary to offer a place for them to wash their feet and hands near the door before the meal. But what Mary does is clearly not this. It is also not a traditional coronation. If it was, she would have anointed Jesus’ head, not his feet. It seems that we are no closer to an answer than when we started.

I think that Jesus’ response can actually help us answer our question about the purpose of Mary’s anointing. Because I don’t think that the answer has to be one or the other. That’s the wonderful thing about having scripture that we call a living word. Within the goalposts of faith we are given a rich variety of ways to understand God’s work in the world. And it’s precisely the fact that it IS God’s work that allows us that freedom. On this journey to the cross in the season of Lent we head towards Jerusalem, towards an event that strikes all of us differently at different times. We are

forced to confront the reality of our savior's death, but at the same time we celebrate that God has sent a Messiah to save us!

In verse 3 we read that "*the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.*" It's an interesting detail. Did you know that the church has often talked about the witness of our own faith being shown forth in a way similar to that of a perfume? What we see in today's Gospel reading is just that, a community of believers who gather around Jesus to give thanks and eat a meal together. And in the midst of that place the fragrance of their faith permeates the place. Sounds like a wonderful time to me. Amen.