

Anointing John 12:1-8

It's the women. In the gospel of John, it is women who are present and active at times of transition in Jesus' life.

Earlier this year when we read from chapter 2 of John's account, we paid attention to Mary, Jesus' mother. She was the one giving the nudge to Jesus' public ministry with her instructions at the wedding at Cana where Jesus turned water into wine. Today's reading marks the end of that phase of Jesus' life. Now, Jesus is preparing to enter Jerusalem, towards his impending death at the hands of the Roman authorities.

It is now Mary of Bethany whose dramatic actions – with its attendant theological claims - that feature in this story. We know who Mary is. She, her sister Martha, and their brother Lazarus share a home in Bethany, about two miles outside of Jerusalem. They are not only followers of Jesus, they are intimates, close friends..... pretty much family. Their home is one where Jesus goes to rest, to be recharged, to be cared for. He loves them. And they love him.

You will remember them from chapter 11 of the gospel, when John shows us Jesus' power even over death, as he raises Lazarus from the tomb. Lazarus, whose body had been anointed with fragrant oil, and wrapped in strips of cloth, before being raised from the dead by Jesus' command. John's writings are full of sensory details in that story as well, you may recall. Martha had said to Jesus, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days."

Note, as well, that it is a woman here, in this story, who demonstrates and proclaims a deep faith in Jesus. She is the one who makes this claim about him: despite her brother's death she tells Jesus, "Even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him. " "I believe," Martha continues, "that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." Quite the prophet-women, these sisters, are they not? (John 11:21,27)

The smells, the sounds, the place, the sights, the emotions – and the theological proclamations of that miraculous event are still with them as they gather around the table this day in Bethany. The location is important: Jaime Clark-Soles points out in her book, *Reading John for Dear Life*, that "When studying the Gospel of John, you should regularly repeat this phrase: Geography is theology." We are to "notice in John

whenever Jesus is in Galilee, life is splendid for him; but whenever he heads south to Judea, the ominous music begins to play in the background.”¹

The whole family is present at the table here in Bethany, in Judea. We are told that Martha is serving (*diakonos* – from which we get the word Deacon), Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. And imagine that as a profound and – let’s be honest -- disturbing sign of Jesus’ power and presence and promise. The previously-dead man, now alive, sitting and eating and talking and simply by being there, pointing to resurrection – to the power of God to give new life – *abundant life*, which is the major theme of John’s gospel. And yet, we know he also represents threat... it was in the raising of Lazarus that many began to follow Jesus, causing alarm among the religious authorities.

In this supper, for family, friends, disciples, it is Mary’s turn, now, to be the prophet-woman. By her actions, we see that Mary is the one who recognizes and acknowledges what is going to happen next.

“Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair.”

It’s shocking because it’s so intimate. And it’s so experiential. It so deeply touches all our senses: smell and touch and vision. Anointing is no haphazard act. Fingers and hands are precise and intentional. They function in a priestly way – this touch carries meaning, it is a holy act. We can imagine the letting down of Mary’s long hair, the warmth and gentleness of its texture on Jesus’ feet. And the smell! John even tells us: “The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.” It was a sharp intoxicating scent, described as halfway between mint and ginseng.

This anointing was Lavish. Costly. Excessive.

John even gives us the foil of Judas Iscariot (who never comes across well in John’s gospel) to be the voice that dramatically shouts about the wastefulness of Mary’s actions. Jamie Clark- Soles describes it as: “Right in the midst of Mary’s gracious, selfless, generous, daring act of hospitality, Judas tries to kill the moment.”²

How much did this cost? Judas lets us know: Three hundred denarii – about a year’s wages!

How much does this cost? The answer is important. Mary, in a radical act of self-giving, offers a direct and immediate experience of service and of extravagant care.

*So strange / so sweet / so shocking / so absurd ... are the words of poem by Thomas John Carlisle. The rhyme and reason / of her reckless gift / have no excuse / but love.*³

Mary's outpouring of love is costly and poured out without abandon. Prophet-Mary sees who Jesus is, the Son of God, whose own outpouring of love is costly and poured out without abandon. With her hands, she anoints him. With her hair, she wipes his feet. With his body, he will be the suffering servant, the one who is on the way to the cross.

Alyce McKenzie describes it like this: "(She) Mary has sat at his feet and now anoints his feet. She hasn't misunderstood his title or misread his résumé. She knows exactly who he is and the kind of honor he is due. He deserves an act of extravagant holiness. The smell of perfume amid the stench of betrayal, jealousy, and looming violence. A sweet moment of stillness amid a gathering storm. An outpouring of homage amid the onslaught of hatred."

I love her words as she continues:

"By this extravagant act, Mary introduces Jesus to anyone who still doesn't know who he is. She anoints him beforehand for burial, because he is or will soon be the lamb slain, the crucified Messiah...she lovingly bathes his feet because, after the Resurrection (as Mary Magdalene discovers in John 20:17), the opportunity to offer physical comfort and affection to the earthly Jesus will be a thing of the past as he prepares to ascend to his Father.

By her actions, she says, "I would like to introduce Jesus, the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, the suffering, serving Son of Man, the Son of God who, for a little while, gave us the opportunity to sit at his feet. I would like to cherish him for one bright, fragrant moment, before the sewage of hatred and violence washes over him and carries him away." ⁴

"Leave her alone," Jesus said. "She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial... you do not always have me."

At this point, in our season of Lent, one week away from Holy Week - we have this moment to pause, like Mary, and cherish him for one bright, fragrant moment.

We know what is coming next. And it's not a stretch to think that Jesus found inspiration and strength from this anointing blessing. Jesus, in the very next chapter of the gospel, will perform a similar act of meaning and grace. Upon his arrival in Jerusalem, Jesus "knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that

he had come from God and was going to God,” will get up during supper, take off his outer robe, tie a towel around himself, pour water into a basin, wash his disciple’s feet, and wipe them with the towel that is tied around him.

“Love one another,” he will tell his friends. “Love one another, as I have loved you.”

Jesus will go from there to suffer and die, and to rise again He continues to demonstrate the extravagance of God’s love, and the excessiveness of God’s mercy. ⁵

Mary understood it.

God willing.... so may we.

*A prophet-woman broke a jar, by Love’s divine appointing.
With rare perfume she filled the room, presiding and anointing.
A prophet-woman broke a jar, the sneers of scorn defying.
With rare perfume she filled the room, preparing Christ for dying.
Glory to God, Hymn 201, v 1*

¹ Jaime Clark-Soles, *Reading John for Dear Life*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2016, p. 72

² Clark-Soles, p. 83

³ “Justification” from *Beginning with Mary*, Eerdmans Publishing Co. Grand Rapids, MI, 1986

⁴ Her Extravagant Holiness: Reflections on John 12:1-8, March 13, 2021, patheos.com
<https://www.patheos.com/progressive-christian/extravagant-holiness-alyce-mckenzie-03-11-2013>

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Prophet Mary*, March 21, 2010. https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002928/the_prophet_mary