

Final Preparations

Texts: Isaiah 50:4-9, John 12:2-16

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Palm Sunday. The beginning of Holy Week. For the disciples and followers of Jesus Christ, they had no idea what was to come throughout the week. They had no clue about what they would experience, go through, and how they would be responsible for sitting with their actions and inactions as it related to how they responded to Jesus' arrest, beating, and ultimately crucifixion. But Jesus knew. Jesus knew what was coming for Him – Jesus knew how His week would end, and more importantly, how the next week, Sunday, would begin. So for Him, there are preparations to be made.

We join the text from the Gospel of John as Mary is taking this nard, this very expensive perfume to anoint Jesus. She pours it on Jesus' feet and wipes His feet with her hair. Everyone gathered at that dinner could smell the extravagance and the generosity of that moment between Mary and Jesus. What were Mary's intentions in doing this for Jesus? Was it in gratitude for the fact that Jesus raised her brother Lazarus from the dead? That this dinner was given in Jesus' honor and so she wanted to honor Him in this way? What she probably did not realize until later was that she was preparing Jesus for what was to come.

John Witvliet, professor of worship, theology, and congregational and ministry studies at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan, writes, "In a scene of generous hospitality and intimate fellowship, Jesus, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus have gathered in the afterglow of Lazarus' return to life (John 12:1-11). Lazarus is reclining at the table with Jesus. Martha, ever the active servant, is serving food. Artists depicting this scene reach instinctively for the warmest possible palette of colors and pain themselves to depict facial expressions of an almost unimaginable degree of warm-hearted tenderness.

Then Mary offers her gesture of devotion to Jesus, lavishing a full pint of exquisite perfume over Jesus' feet and upending conventions of decorum by unfurling her hair to wipe them. Just a few days before, Jesus, Mary, and Martha were confronted by the stench of Lazarus' decaying body. Now, with Lazarus, they are basking in the aroma of luxurious perfume.

Following three years of ministry in which observers responded to Jesus in such oppositional and awkward ways, what a remarkable picture of true devotion this is—Mary's unashamed, humble, extravagant gesture. Nothing here resembles a grudging obeisance to a distant deity or an agreeable, but half-hearted engagement in typical religious protocols. This is whole-hearted adoration of a loving Lord" (From Internet. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/april-web-only/marys-perfume-cross-utter-devotion.html>. 03/24/21).

Judas does not see the meaning in this act, though. He is thinking only of himself, of missed opportunities to skim off the top. Judas is only concerned with how this could benefit him – pad his pocketbook. Unlike Mary, who displays faith, grace, and humility. How can we show these gestures of devotion to Jesus in our daily lives like Mary did? How does this simple act of Mary's impact us toward simple acts of faith in Christ?

"The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, 'Hosanna!' 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!' 'Blessed is the king of Israel!' Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, as it is written: 'Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt.'" This parade, while a celebration for the people, is the first of the events kicking off this week for Jesus. Jesus knows that this is the beginning of the journey toward His death on the cross. He understands that His riding in on the young donkey fulfills the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9.

Jesus also knew that the cheers would end as the crowds would scatter. Or worse yet, the crowds cheering for Him today would be among those calling for the release of the criminal, Barabbas, instead of Jesus. The disciples were in the moment. I am sure they were loving all of this attention, this pomp and circumstance, the identity and “fame” they have by being one of Jesus’ inner circle. The Messiah is with THEM – and they are basking in this newfound glory. However, Jesus resolves to go on, to accept His fate, as the final preparations are made.

“At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that these things had been done to him.” They did not understand. In the moment of that parade – the excitement, the cheers, the waving of the palm branches, how could they understand? It was only after they went through the emotions and events of the week – and Jesus was glorified in His resurrection, that they were able to comprehend the weight and significance of those moments.

Where are we at this point in Jesus’ story? Are we making final preparations for these final days of Lent? Are we preparing ourselves – our souls – for experiencing and reliving the gruesome and disturbing crucifixion of our Savior? Are we ready to be so devoted to Christ that we pour out our own lavishness on Him – and share in the extravagance of our faith? Are we in a position to give of ourselves to Christ in the same way that Mary did?

John Witvliet continues, “For those of us who follow Jesus, it is tempting to be attracted by a vision of the Christian life that is filled with warm hospitality and even extravagant worship, but that has no real room in it for a suffering and dying Lord or for the dying-to-ourselves way of life into which Jesus calls us.

The temptation will come to us on Palm Sunday to reach for happy major-key praise songs to sing while carrying palm branches instead of sturdy minor-key odes which announce,

‘Ride on, Ride on in majesty; in lowly pomp, ride on to die.’ The temptation will come to skip from Palm Sunday to Easter, with little attention to the pathos and severe injustice of Jesus’ suffering and death.

The temptation will come, again and again, to serve a Lord who is quite different in our imagination than the one depicted in John’s gospel—to treat Jesus’ passion and death as a momentary exception in the story of divine glory, rather than as the supreme example of it”

(From Internet).

Where are you in the story of Jesus right now? Where do you need to be before Thursday? Or Friday? Or when you discover again the empty tomb next Sunday? How are you making your final preparations? Let us pray...

Loving God, the excitement of the events of the Palm Sunday hang over us as we think ahead. To Thursday when Jesus will be arrested and betrayed. When His prayers will weigh on Him like drops of blood – and the disciples will fall asleep at the time He needs them the most. Then to Friday and the crucifixion. Father God, help us to prepare ourselves to remember and relive this week. In doing so, let it draw us closer to You in faith. Through Christ we pray, Amen.