

Isaiah 43:16-21 ~ John 12:1-8  
*Full to the Brim: Brazen Acts of Beauty*  
5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent ~ April 3, 2022  
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*Introduction*

You've likely heard about the woman who anointed Jesus' feet with lots of expensive ointment and wiped them with her hair. It's an unforgettable, highly sensory, pungently aromatic story. You can imagine the story being told from village to village as they gathered to draw water from the village well. Just think if they had Twitter to spread this sensational tale. Shocking, outrageous. Did she, really? With her hair? OMG.

Various forms of this story about a woman anointing Jesus, appear in all four gospels. In Matthew and Mark, the woman is a stranger, Luke adds that this strange woman is a "sinner." It's easy to conflate these stories into a kind of composite sketch in our minds. But in John's account, this morning's gospel text, the woman who performs this strange, yet sacramental act, is neither "stranger" nor "sinner." In John, the woman is Mary, one of Jesus' very best friends. Here the anointing of Jesus' feet, by a woman with her hair, is done by a dear friend among intimates, besties.

There are a lot of Mary's in the New Testament, this Mary is the sister of Martha. Yup, *that* Mary and Martha of Bethany. Remember, Martha who complains to Jesus about having to do all the work, while Mary just sits at Jesus' feet, not even setting the table, but instead just listening to Jesus? Here these two are again, along with their brother, Lazarus, whom Jesus had just resuscitated after being dead for four days. Raising Lazarus spelled trouble for Jesus. Displaying that kind of power freaked out those in political power. Jesus knew it would, but he did it anyway. A brazen act for one he dearly loved.

It would be the last and culminating sign of Jesus' mystical power in John's gospel. The next day will be his final entrance into Jerusalem on a donkey. Today is our 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent: we can see and feel and smell the curtain beginning to close on Jesus' earthly life. He is no longer walking about openly. Since raising Lazarus, there was a warrant out for his arrest. Anyone who saw him was supposed to turn him in. Surely his intimates could feel the clock ticking, the world shifting beneath their feet. They could taste and see death approaching.

I think this is where we can connect to this ancient story. We know what death looks like. We know what it tastes and smells like. Especially in these past two pandemic threaded years. Death in our own lives and around the world. With the Russian war on Ukraine raging, and the extreme hunger and desperation in Afghanistan, we are aware deep in our guts of suffering and death too numerous and gruesome to truly grasp. We are spared the smells that accompany those images from across the ocean. Closer to home, we have experienced literal deaths of dear family members and friends. And there are other kinds of deaths or endings that we all face. Whether it's the end of a relationship or the end of a life chapter, let's be honest: ends are hard. We typically do what we can to avoid them. But we know what death smells like.

While none of us can know for sure what was going on inside of Mary's head or heart at the time of this story. But we *do have an account right here of* what she chose to do, and how Jesus responded to her brazen, extravagant, yes, prodigal act, in face of death. Let us open our hearts, our eyes, and our nostrils, to experience the Word of God, as it is written in these words of scripture from John 12, beginning at verse 1.

### *Sermon*

For me, it is the aroma of my mom's streusel-filled coffee cake baking in the oven. What is it for you? Maybe turkey roasting in the oven on Thanksgiving, brats on the grill on a summer day, a fresh cut of lumber in the garage, or your dad's signature cologne. Perhaps it's the essence of a place that holds memories: a whiff of a pine forest, a pile of autumn leaves, or the dense sweetness of night-blooming Jasmine. Surely you can think of an aroma that hits your nostrils and teleports you directly to a time and place, where you felt loved, embraced, enveloped. Yes, *anointed* in God's affirming presence. Even if it has been years and years since that experience, one good whiff and you're there. So there. Try bringing yours to mind right now... What does Divine Love *smell* like for you?

For Mary, in that confusing, bitter sweet moment, it was nard. Also known as Spikenard, an essential oil, that has a heavy, musky, earthy smell, along with floral notes (*thank you Wikipedia*). We are told she used such a crazy amount of Nard, a prodigal, extravagant, excessive, costly amount. So much Nard that the aroma fills the entire house. She proceeds to anoint, not his head, but his feet. Just like what Jesus would do later that week, in about six nights, when he would be at Table with his disciples for the last time, and gets on *his* knees to wash all of the disciples' feet. She shared love and beauty as Jesus would command his disciples to do at the Last Supper.

The only thing that was unmistakably clear at Lazarus' table was the smell of nard. Picture the scene with me: at this dinner party was Lazarus, a man who had been dead but is now alive and hosting this meal, yet silent in this story. Across from Lazarus is Jesus who is alive, but will soon be dead. Mary is already preparing his body for burial. At this table when she isn't scurrying about is Martha, serving (as we would expect), but uncharacteristically silent. We know Martha to be the one that usually speaks her mind. Talkative Martha is silent. And sharing this meal is the typically self-serving Judas who bends ironically benevolent. The scene is surreal, everyone seems to be one thing and another, all at the same time. Neither this nor that. The ground was shifting under their feet. All they could smell for sure was Nard.

Mary couldn't have known exactly what was going to happen. But she did her thing, anyway. Mary was never one to try to be perfect. "Being good" never seemed to be her goal. She showed us what it looks like, what it smells like, to embrace the moment anyway. Embrace it with what you do know. With all your might and muster. Mary showed us how to face the worst with the best we've got. Mary showed us how to acknowledge the complexity of the moment. She shared love and beauty even when everything in the room was shifting under her feet.

In that exchange with Judas, Jesus responded with something that may have surprised you. Jesus who proclaimed again and again that he came "to bring good news to the poor". Jesus who said, "Blessed are the poor," said this. "Leave her alone... You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." Wait, what? What did Jesus mean by that? I can assure you that he did not mean to stop caring about the poor because they are never going to go away. That would contradict everything he taught and did and died for. Yes, the weight of scriptural teachings from Genesis to Revelation shouts otherwise.

So what did he mean? Perhaps he was calling us to give hard look at this question. Why *do* we always have the poor with us? I think one reason is because most of us, most of the time fail to do what Mary did that night at dinner. Most of us *fail* to acknowledge their presence among us. Most of us ignore the poor. Or we organize our lives to avoid rubbing shoulders with the poor, the outsiders, the jackals and the ostriches who are all around us, to use Isaiah's language. We'd rather not acknowledge the desert denizens among us. Yet Jesus is challenging everyone in the room then and now to do otherwise. Jesus is challenging us as a church, as FPC to do the same. As Jesus taught us in Matthew 25, when we serve the least of these, we are serving Christ. The more we acknowledge those who are on the edge, the more we will see Christ.

Friends, we all have brazenly beautiful ways to share God's death-defying grace especially in the face of death. It's probably not anointing with nard. Whatever you've got to give, take a page from Mary's book, and offer it freely, lovingly, sacrificially. Acknowledge the shifting sands under our feet, and can face the worst with the best you've got. Whatever that is. Death is all around us. And for some of us it may be inside of us today. We feel sure there is no way forward. Stuck. Ground to a halt. Or down to a pulp. If only we could go back to the way it was.

So here's the good news I hope you will take home with you today. Our Isaiah text and our gospel story *both* teach us that we are loved by a God whose river always flows forward. The new thing may not be what we expect. Often it is not. But we are called to trust that God's new thing is the thing that will save us and the world, and give it our best, anyway.

The geese do. It's their squawk. That's all they've got. And you can't miss it. Here in early spring, that sound in Wisconsin is everywhere. I love that sound. So did the early Christians. They called the Holy Spirit, "Wild Goose." That's right, not the dove like in our window, but the Wild Goose. Why? You may wonder. You may not be particularly fond of geese. But here's how wild geese reminded the early Christians, particularly Celtic Christians, of the Holy Spirit: They are wild, untamed, unpredictable, upsetting the status quo. Like the Holy Spirit, leading people toward the new thing that God is doing. From death to life. Especially when we can't see it. But maybe we can smell it.

I will give Dame Mary Oliver, one of my favorite poets, reading to you her poem titled, "Wild Geese." Let the Holy Spirit work through her words into your heart, speaking to you.

*You do not have to be good.  
You do not have to walk on your knees  
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.  
You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
love what it loves.  
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.  
Meanwhile the world goes on.  
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
are moving across the landscapes,  
Over the prairies and the deep trees,  
the mountains and the rivers.  
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
are heading home again.  
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.<sup>i</sup>*

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<sup>i</sup> “Wild Geese,” Mary Oliver, *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver*, (Penguin Press: New York, NY, 2017), p. 347.