



SERMONS THAT WORK

Lent 5 (C)

Mary's Anointing

[RCL] Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

Before we dig into our gospel story today, let's go back a few chapters. Let's go back and remember the death of Lazarus. And remember his sisters' grief. When Jesus finally makes it back to Bethany to see about this death, he is met with an accusation: "If you had been here, Lord, this wouldn't have happened." He ignores it and asks for the stone to be rolled away. The grave, with Lazarus' body already a few days dead, stinks. And yet Jesus doesn't mind. He goes right in and raises Lazarus.

In our gospel today, in fact, Lazarus is sitting at the table with him. One sister, Martha, is working in the kitchen, as she is known to do, while the other, Mary, is once again at Jesus' feet. She takes a pound of perfume – of nard – and pours it on her Savior. Was this the same perfume she had from her brother's death? Had some of the ointment been used as she embalmed her brother, weeping just as she is now, only then with sorrow?

This time, she isn't caressing a corpse; she is using this scent of death as an anointing for the God she so dearly loves.

Imagine when she opened the jar. The whole room must have been filled with the fragrance. It might have been almost uncomfortable, like being on a bus with an overly cologned driver. The rich scent is trapped in the room with them. The disciples probably look away; the moment is too intense. Too intimate. Too taboo. For a woman to touch a man at all, let alone for her histrionics and carrying on... Her tears haven't stopped falling since she knelt down. And here she is, in a room full of people – mostly men – with her sister more appropriately in the kitchen.

But Mary doesn't mind. She is compelled to give something to Jesus, to him who raised her brother. She is compelled to turn this nard into something else, to transform it in some way, to reap with joy that which she sowed with tears.

As she massages the oil into his tired arches, she realizes she doesn't have a towel. So, she bends closer, forehead to toes, scoops up her hair, and uses it to absorb the excess.

Judas says something snide, taking the opportunity to look at the devotion of another and mock it. The way she loves Jesus, the way she worships, is different from his way – and he jeers. He judges her difference as less; he judges her spending habits as excessive. In his judging though, we see only the ugliness of his own soul and the ways he is unable to connect with the goodness of God.

Jesus speaks to defend Mary and correct Judas. He is temporal, he says – temporary. He will not always be with them. Time is precious.

Imagine what isn't told in this gospel account: The dinner ending, Mary going to bed, the next day, going to the market to buy fresh vegetables, her hair carrying the scent, the perfume drifting through the streets behind her. This momentary abundance she has shown to Jesus is clinging to her skin somehow, as if even in the most personal act of devotion, she is inviting others in, sharing the sweet scent of her faith with all she passes.

And what must others have thought? It was a perfume used for embalming, after all. Did they wonder who died? Was the scent one that made them wrinkle their noses, uncomfortably prompting thoughts of their own mortality?

Mary took this smell – the smell of death, of mortality, of not enough time – and instead of running from it, instead of hiding it in a drawer or throwing it away, she gave it to God. She used even this jar of expensive sorrow, this jar of love for her brother, and opened it in a room full of men. She allowed the scent to follow her for days, because this thing, this jar, this smell, which used to be about death now held the moment of her brother's resurrection. It now held the moment of her devotion to Jesus. This gospel story comes as a foreshadowing of Jesus' final days, like a prelude to a symphony, it gives us the first notion of what is coming.

At our services on Ash Wednesday, we were marked with our mortality and wandered the streets, perhaps like Mary did. Others wondered why we had soot on our foreheads. Why were we marked with something?

That day, we were invited to the observance of a holy Lent, which we have each done in our own ways. Maybe this season of Lent has brought you closer to God. Maybe it even brings you close to the feet of Jesus.

In this Lenten journey, and in coming this close to God, we have been marked. The sweet scent of something otherworldly, something which used to mark mortality but perhaps now marks resurrection, has sunk into our scalps. Into our skin. We are not the same as we once were. We have been forever changed by the encounters we have had with God.

We are changed even by the simple encounters we might have with God, even by those in this worship space, here, this morning, we are marked. As you walk through town and run errands, as you sit in your

home and read, as you drive in the car, the relationship you have with Jesus – the Love you know in God - will seep into you, sinking into your pores. The scent of faith marks us as belonging to a world not marked by death. It marks us as God's people, as ones who know our own belovedness and proclaim the belovedness of others.

It's the very same scent that filled that room in Bethany. Amen.

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