



SERMONS THAT WORK

Monday in Holy Week

Signs, Passion, and Glory

[RCL] Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 36:5-11; Hebrews 9:11-15; John 12:1-11

Our Gospel lesson is a hinge text. It concludes the first half of John's Gospel, which scholars name "the Book of Signs." It also prepares for the second half of the Gospel, which scholars call either "the Book of Glory" or "the Book of the Passion."

The two names for the second half are telling. Both are correct. Beginning in chapter twelve, the remainder of the Gospel deals with the last week of Jesus' life. It is the story of his passion. It is the story of his glorification. Both are accurate characterizations of Jesus' death.

As we begin our observation of Holy Week – as we liturgically experience the events in the last week of Jesus' earthly life – we probably bring with us a variety of convictions, questions, aversions, and fears about Jesus' death. It probably doesn't help that some of the most unedifying squabbles in church history have been over the meaning of Christ's death. These debates filter down in our assumptions and in the ways we try to police others' views of Jesus' death:

- Jesus' death is sacrifice, a reconciliation of everything in heaven and earth through the blood of the cross. *Isn't the whole idea of sacrifice primitive and noxious?*
- Jesus' death on the cross is a victory over the forces of sin, death, and the devil. *Why would an all-powerful God have to deal with the devil in the first place?*
- Jesus' death makes satisfaction for our sins. *What kind of God would demand the death of his innocent Son in order to forgive human sins?*
- Jesus' death is an example of self-giving love that inspires us to participate in his self-offering. *Are you saying that we can save ourselves?*
- Jesus' death is an atonement for the elect. *Didn't Jesus die for the sins of the whole world?*
- Jesus was executed by a corrupt empire. Period. *Is there no theological meaning to be found in Jesus' death whatsoever?*

Explicitly or implicitly, these ideas and debates shape our perceptions of Jesus' death during Holy Week. Sacrifice? Victory? Satisfaction? Example? Execution? The Book of Glory or the Book of the Passion?

In our Gospel lesson, the characters in the story each represent a different perspective on Jesus' death. At the home of Lazarus, a dinner is given for Jesus. The theme for the evening is clearly his impending death. The Gospel of John places the crucifixion on the day before Passover so that Jesus dies at the same time the lambs for the Passover meal would have been slaughtered. The mention of the time of the dinner "six days before the Passover" already frames Jesus' death in light of the occasion. Early in the Gospel, John the Baptist declared, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Jesus' death is interpreted in light of the Passover, but in Jesus' case, his death will deliver us from the power of sin.

Lazarus was at the dinner. He says and does nothing. Yet, his silent presence says a lot about how we should understand Jesus' death. Earlier in the Gospel, Lazarus had died, but Jesus raised him from the dead. This was a sign of the resurrection, an assurance that when Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life," he was speaking the truth. All Lazarus has to do is sit there. His presence is testimony enough that Jesus' death will not be the end of the story. The end of the story will have to do with life, and, in Jesus' case, eternal life.

At the dinner, Martha served the guests. This picture of Martha serving is consistent with what we know of Martha from the Gospel of Luke. But in our passage from John, where the theme of the evening is Jesus' death, we also see another faithful approach. One thing faithful people do at the time of death is feed people. It is a tangible sign of care in the presence of death, when grief often causes us to forget to take care. In the face of Jesus' impending death, Martha offers the sacred service of providing a meal.

Mary anoints Jesus' feet with a pound of costly nard and wipes them with her hair. The whole house is filled with the fragrance of the perfume. This is Mary's approach to Jesus' death, which Jesus interprets for us as a preparation for his burial. It is a love offering that fills the whole house. Mary's action points to an interpretation of Jesus' death that sees it as a love offering that will fill the whole world. When Jesus is lifted up on the cross, he will draw the whole world to himself.

Judas' response to Mary's love offering reveals his character as a betrayer and a thief. He raises an objection: Why waste the perfume anointing Jesus when it could have been sold and the money given to the poor? The narrator makes clear that Judas didn't really care for the poor. He only wanted to steal from the common purse. Yet, Jesus' response to Judas, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me," strikes many as callous. In historical context, however, it is part of Jewish wisdom on how to balance the two goods of almsgiving and care for the dead. Both are good things to do. But when you can't do both, Jewish teachers have said, priority ought to be given to caring for the dead. It's kind of like if one of my neighbors had a death in the family and I brought a casserole over to their house. If someone criticized me for not giving that casserole to the poor, we would think them pastorally tone-deaf. It would be great to make casseroles for the poor *and* for my grieving neighbors. But sometimes, we need to make a choice and care for the dying and the grieving. Judas misses this.

We are also told that many Judeans were believing in Jesus because he raised Lazarus from the dead. This positive response of many Jewish people to Jesus is important to remember, especially in John's Gospel. Many believed in him.

Some of the religious authorities, however, sought to kill not only Jesus but Lazarus as well. Their approach to Jesus' death was that it is better for one person to die for the sake of the whole nation. In the irony of John's Gospel, these religious authorities are both wrong and right. They are wrong in their intentions to kill Jesus. They are, despite themselves, right that Jesus' death will save not only the whole nation but the whole world.

As we follow Jesus on the way of the cross during Holy Week, it may be helpful to remember the variety of approaches to Jesus' death that we see in the Gospel. In addition to the approaches to Jesus' death that we find in our lesson, John's Gospel portrays Jesus' death as the accomplishment of the Father's work, the glorification of Jesus, the defeat of the ruler of this world, a drawing of all people to himself, and a propitiation for sin. Perhaps we can see this variety as a gift, rather than something to squabble over. Maybe different people need to hear and experience different aspects of Jesus' death during Holy Week. Maybe we need to hear and experience a different aspect of Jesus' death during this Holy Week than we have in the past. Maybe, if Jesus draws all people to himself when he is lifted on the cross, we should honor the variety of ways people find healing, forgiveness, deliverance, encouragement, and salvation in his death and resurrection.

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