

Sermon Series: *Palm Sunday*



A Party for Jesus

Palm Sunday

John 12:1-19 (ESV)

¹ Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ² So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table. ³ Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, ⁵ "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" ⁶ He said this, not because he cared about the

poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it. ⁷ Jesus said, "Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸ For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me."

⁹ When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ¹⁰ So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, ¹¹ because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus.

¹² The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. ¹³ So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!" ¹⁴ And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written,

¹⁵ "Fear not, daughter of Zion;
behold, your king is coming,
sitting on a donkey's colt!"

¹⁶ His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him. ¹⁷ The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to bear witness. ¹⁸ The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had done this sign. ¹⁹ So the Pharisees said to one another, "You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him."

Introduction

Today is Palm Sunday. It's the anniversary of the day that Jerusalem welcomed Jesus into the city as their messiah-king. It was a day of great joy and celebration. This day came at time of national celebration as the observance of Passover was about to begin. Passover reminded Israel of God's great power to deliver them from their enemies. On this day, the Jews welcomed Jesus as king hoping he'd use all his power to deliver them from their enemies, the oppressive Romans.

But why did they welcome Jesus as the messiah-king on this day? How had Jesus moved, in the minds of the people, from being thought of merely as a prophet to being thought of as the Davidic, messiah-king? What had caused the change? The crowds had certainly welcomed Jesus on many other occasions before, but what had happened that caused them to cut off palm branches and wave them at Jesus? What caused them to throw off their cloaks and lay them down on the road in front of Jesus? What caused such a large number of them to sing and shout?

Yes, Jesus had made the unusual decision to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey. It is true that he had never done anything like this before. It is true that there were Old Testament prophecies

about the messiah coming into Jerusalem on a donkey, but what fact (or facts) stood behind that symbolism that caused so many people—at this moment—to believe that Jesus actually was the messiah? What had happened that caused thousands of people to start singing,

"Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!"

The Raising of Lazarus from the Dead

John helps us understand this shift in thinking. John points our attention to one precipitating event, the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Jesus had performed many miracles, even raising two other people from the dead. But something was different about Lazarus' situation. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead after he had already buried. Lazarus had been sealed in the tomb and lay there dead for four days. Raising someone from the dead after his body had been decaying four days in a tomb is an unquestionably convincing miracle that God had uniquely anointed this man called Jesus. Jesus literally had been given power over life and death.

Jesus intended for this to be known, for this is why he delayed his coming to them. Remember what Mary had said, *"Jesus, if only you had been here sooner, then Lazarus would not have died"* (Jn 11:32). And then Jesus said, *"I know. That's why I waited so long to arrive. I want you to see and understand that I can do something more glorious than sustaining life. I can overcome death."*

And so standing before a crowd of people who had been mourning the death of Lazarus for over half a week, Jesus walked to the tomb of Lazarus and said, *"Take away the stone"* (Jn. 11:39). The ever-practical Martha then reminded Jesus that taking away the stone would release the odor. Jesus told her that he was about to release the glory of God in way that had never been seen in the history of the world. Then, using his outside voice, Jesus said, *"Lazarus, come out!"* And Lazarus obeyed. At the command of Jesus, his soul returned to his body, he got up, and came out from a dark tomb into the bright sunlight of a new day.

John 11:45-46 (ESV)

⁴⁵ *Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him,* ⁴⁶ *but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.*

John 11:53 (ESV)

⁵³ *So from that day on they made plans to put him to death.*

That's pretty amazing isn't it? You heal someone from a fatal disease called death and people start planning to kill you. You demonstrate power over death, and that's the very thing that

causes some people to start planning yours. So Jesus had to put on his stealth suit, stop posting on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter and take a little vacation in the safe house.¹

They Issued a Warrant for His Arrest

Everything was ok for a few days until it was time to go to Jerusalem for Passover. The chief priests and the Pharisees knew this was their opportunity to catch him. They knew Jesus would obey God's command to go to Jerusalem for Passover. They had him. He would have to come out of hiding. So they issued an arrest warrant for Jesus.² They gave orders that if anyone saw Jesus, he should be reported immediately. Jesus decided to go visit Lazarus.

John 12:1 (ESV)

¹ Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.

This is Bethany in 1865.

Bethany was the hometown of Lazarus and his two sisters, Mary and Martha.



This is what it looks like today.

Bethany it was only about 2 miles from Jerusalem.



The '**therefore**' in this verse means Jesus knew they were looking to arrest him and that he was willingly walking into danger. Jesus knew what was coming and he intentionally faced it. The enemies of Jesus were waiting for him in Jerusalem, **therefore** Jesus starting traveling toward Jerusalem. The time was now right for the plan to reach its fulfillment.

Six Days Before Passover: John's Incredible Details

Six days before Passover Jesus arrived in Bethany where Lazarus lived. The apostle John is very detailed. He offers a level of specificity that none of the other gospel writers offer. John spends over half of his whole letter on this final week of Jesus' life. John wants you and me to know as much as possible about Jesus and the events that unfolded in his final days. John takes us into the moment by moment details of Jesus' last days in a way no other gospel writer does. He wants you to see the sights, smell the smells, and hear the words that surrounded the completion of Jesus' mission on earth. He wants your mind locked in on Jesus. So push away

¹ Jn. 11:54.

² John 11:57.

every distraction right now. Forget about whatever you have planned today. Don't worry about lunch or the kids or what you're going to do with your friends. Let all that go for a few minutes, and walk with me in the footsteps of Jesus. Go back with me to an evening that turned out to be pivotal in setting in motion a series of events that would end in the death of Jesus.

A Dinner Party for Jesus

While in Bethany, some decided to throw a dinner party for Jesus.

John 12:2 (ESV)

² So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table.

We know from the Gospels of Matthew and Mark that this dinner was hosted in the home of Simon the leper.³ Martha, Lazarus' sister, was probably among those who planned this dinner, since she is there hosting and serving. She's taking care of food and refilling glasses. She's busy cooking and baking and serving. Evidently this was a dinner of appreciation for Jesus showing gratitude for bringing Lazarus back from the dead. Jesus is the guest of honor.

Lazarus is seated there at table with Jesus as a kind of living testimony to the power, goodness, and glory of God being displayed in this world through Jesus. John tells us where Martha is and what she's doing. She is serving. We know where Lazarus is and what he's doing. He's at table with Jesus.

But where is Mary?

John 12:3 (ESV)

³ Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

Martha is concerned with food and with serving. Lazarus is reclining at table answering question about what it was like during the four days he was dead and whether or not he saw a bright light when he died or felt a warm sensation, etc. but Mary, where is she and what is she doing. Mary is thinking about Jesus. Mary is listening to Jesus. She is focused on his every word.

Mary, just like Jesus, knows there is an arrest warrant out for Jesus. She knows the chief priests and Pharisees hate Jesus and want him taken into custody. She knows if Jesus goes to

³ Mt. 26:6-13; Mk. 14:3-9.

Jerusalem, the likelihood is that he will be arrested. She also knows that Jesus will not disobey God and fail to go to Jerusalem for Passover. She knows he's walking into trouble.

This scene is recored in both the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Mark. However, neither of them name the women who did this. Only John tells us that it was Mary, Lazarus' sister. Matthew and Mark also tell us that she anointed Jesus' head. John points out that she also anointed his feet. John focus on the feet. John wants you to see Mary bowing down at Jesus' feet and wiping his feet with her hair.

Only John tells us exactly how much of the ointment she used. It was a pound (Greek *litre*), a Roman pound, which was a half-liter, or about 11.5 ounces. So the amount of ointment was roughly the amount that would fill a soda can. That's a lot. That's more than enough to anoint both his head and his feet. It was enough to **fill the whole house with the fragrance of the perfume**. [This is the kind of detail an eye witness would recall.]

If you're wondering what it would have smelled like, I have some for you to sample. After smelling, please pass it along through each section. The ointment was made from pure nard, which was found in northern India. This was imported perfume.

Matthew tells us that the perfume jar was made of alabaster. It was the size of a soda can and would have looked something like this. Mark tells us that she broke the jar, which means she had no intention of keeping any of it. She had decided to use it all right then and there. She anointed Jesus' head and then she poured some on his feet and then **she wiped his feet with her hair**.



This tells me her decision was a spontaneous act of devotion. She didn't prepare in advance to do this. She didn't grab a cloth to wipe up the ointment. She grabbed the jar, broke it, and poured it out on Jesus without any thought about the clean up. She was so overjoyed with Jesus that didn't take any thought for how to wipe up the excessive overflow of oil. If you're ever poured out oil, you know it runs everywhere. She had no towel, so she used her hair.

No doubt there were some there who would have reprimanded her for this thoughtlessness. How many times have we as parents squashed the joy of our children because all we can think about is cleaning up.

No, I'm not buying you Lego and giving you an opportunity to expand the creativity of your mind because you'll leave those silly Legos lying all over the floor and you'll never pick them up and they'll get scattered around and I'll step on them in the dark and pierce the bottom of my foot.

Or...

No, I'm not buying you a paint, brushes, or canvas because you'll have paint all over the house like you did with the spaghetti sauce the other night and I don't care if your nickname at school is Picasso or if all your teachers think your father is Monet. I'm not buying you painting supplies no matter how happy it makes you because I'll have to clean up the mess!

Matthew tells us that Mary was ridiculed by the disciples, plural, meaning more than one.

Come on Mary, you've poured out all this ointment all over Jesus and you didn't bring a towel? What were you thinking? Now you're using your hair to wipe it up? This is unbelievable.

Mary is here, like a little child, delighting in Jesus. Her joy in Jesus is overflowing with an innocent act of devotion, yet her happiness in Jesus is not welcomed by those around her. You see, middle eastern women never let down their hair in public. No respectable woman would ever let down her hair in the presence of anyone other than her husband. To let down the hair in public was considered sexually seductive and in the Mishna (a collection of Jewish commentary on the law) is listed among legitimate grounds for divorce.⁴ This scene unfolding in front of us is ridiculous and wasteful. And Judas is the first to voice how nonsensical this is.

John 12:4-5 (ESV)

⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, ⁵ "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?"

This 11.5 ounces of ointment that Mary just poured over Jesus, from head to feet, was worth more than 300 denarii. One denarii was the equivalent of what the average laborer would earn in one day. So this ointment was worth more than 300 days wages. That's almost a year. This is enormously expensive.

Let's convert this into today's culture. Minimum wage is \$11 per hour. If the average day is eight hours, that's \$88 a day. If you multiply that by 300 days, that's \$26,400. Mary just poured a \$26,400 bottle of perfume over Jesus' head and feet and wiped up the excess with her hair.

Judas: A Money Loving Thief

And Judas shows his piety with a very practical concern for the poor. Judas complains that this was a total waste. This ointment could have been sold and given to the poor. But actually Judas has no concern for the poor at all and John alerts us to this fact.

John 12:6-7 (ESV)

⁴ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 248.

⁶ He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it. ⁷

Judas was not mad because the poor were going hungry. Judas was mad because he saw his opportunity to fill his pockets with a bonus get poured out all over Jesus. Like oil slipping through the fingers, Judas just saw a big chunk of money slip out of his grasp. Judas was a money-loving thief because he used to help himself to the money in the community chest. Judas is ticked off at this loss of potential money.

Leave Her Alone

But Jesus is ticked off at Judas and has a few words for him.

John 12:7-8 (ESV)

⁷ Jesus said, "Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸ For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me."

Jesus tells Judas, "Leave her alone." Jesus will not allow Judas to squash Mary's joy. Jesus will not tolerate Judas' love of money masquerading as pious religiosity. True love of Jesus is not always manifested in monetary generosity. Jesus says,

Judas, back off of her. If you're so concerned about the poor, then you can volunteer at the soup kitchen any day of the week. You can help the poor people whenever you want because you'll never lack the opportunity to help them. However, I won't always be around, because my burial is coming soon.

Verse seven is difficult to understand, but as the ESV footnote (in verse seven) indicates, another way of translating this is, "Leave her alone, because **she intended to keep it for the day of my burial.**" If this is the correct translation, then it makes a lot of sense. We don't know how Mary acquired such an expensive bottle of ointment, but Jesus somehow knew that she was saving it to anoint his body after he had died. It was common to anoint dead bodies of loved ones in order to mask the stench of death.

However, Mary couldn't wait until Jesus was dead to show her devotion. She knew the likelihood of Jesus being arrested if he went to Jerusalem was high. Perhaps she wondered if he would be killed. Her devotion to Jesus overflows and she can no longer hide her joy. She can't keep it inside any longer. She pours out all she has on Jesus. Out of pure love for him she gives him a gift that was worth almost a year's wages. Jesus said,

Matthew 26:10 (ESV)

"She has done a beautiful thing to me."⁵

⁵ Mt. 26:10; Mk. 14:6.

This was not a beautiful thing in the eyes of Judas. He's had enough. Both Matthew and Mark⁶ record that right after this dinner Judas left and went straight to the Pharisees and offered to help them capture Jesus. His heart yearned for some money. He knew the Pharisees wanted Jesus so he went to them and asked, "How much will you give me if I help you capture him?"⁷ And for thirty pieces of silver, or about \$1,000 in today's money, Judas made a deal to betray the messiah-king of Israel.

Conclusion

The contrast between Judas and Mary is inescapable. Mary's devotion to Jesus overflowed in an act of extravagant love. Judas' devotion to money overflowed in an act of breathtaking betrayal. Mary happily parted with a year's wages as she openly demonstrated her love of Jesus. Judas was enraged at thought of losing something he didn't even have as he demonstrated his secret hatred of Jesus.

Mary was willing to lose what may have been her most precious possession in order to show her devotion to Jesus. She did so at great risk, by letting down her hair and wiping Jesus' feet. Mary was happy to bow at Jesus' feet. In that moment, she didn't care about anyone else's opinion. It was just her and Jesus in the room. If Jesus was about to die, she wanted him to know that he was her Lord and master. She was devoted to him. She cherished him above all other earthly goods.

This is what it means to be a Christian.

It means loving Jesus more than anything else in the world. Being a Christian is treasuring Christ more than money, personal fame, job, family, and even your own life. As Martin Luther wrote, "Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also." Being a Christian means having more joy in Jesus than you find anywhere else.

Who are you in this story? Judas or Mary?

What fragrance fills the room of your soul? Is it one of devotion to Jesus? Or is it one of devotion to the world? What is your greatest treasure, eternal joy in Jesus or the temporary thrill of the passing pleasures of this planet?

⁶ Mt. 26:14-16; Mk. 14:10-11.

⁷ Mt. 26:15.