

What Are We Waiting For?

It's broken. All the superglue in the world cannot mend it. It's shattered beyond repair. And she has left a mess in her wake, a mess that is not easily swept up or cleared away. The fragrance will hang in the warm air for hours, if not days. And there's no going back. There's been no going back for days now. A few days ago, Jesus rode in on that colt while people waved branches and threw their coats on the ground. The next day he made his way to the Temple where he overturned the money changers' tables and preached about the Temple's being a house of prayer for all people. He debated Pharisees and scribes. He told parables about wicked tenants and pointed out a widow's offering of her last two cents. And he spoke of the Temple itself being torn down. After weeks of telling the disciples not to tell anyone who he is or anything about what they know, the powers-that-be have taken notice. Jesus has made sure of it.

The two verses that come before our text this morning tell us that: "The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him."¹ The dramatic action is reaching a fevered pitch. We can see the coming conflict. And as we watch and listen and wait, we meet Jesus where we so often do, sitting at table with a questionable crowd. He's at Simon's house, who has a skin disease or leprosy. And then this woman comes on the scene. Without a word, she cracks open this jar and pours the perfume on his head. When looking at older images of this story, everything looks so calm and orderly. The woman carefully pours just a bit of perfume on Jesus' waiting head. But that's not what the text tells us. She does not remove a stopper and pour out a few precious drops. No, Mark

¹ Mark 14: 1, NRSVue

tells us that she breaks it open and pours it out, all of it, he leads us to believe. And Jesus' dinner companions are outraged.

Here Jesus sits at table with friends—his closest companions we assume—and they sound as angry as the religious leaders plotting against Jesus in Jerusalem a few miles away. If we're honest, we can sympathize. That's a lot of perfume, expensive perfume. I remember tiptoeing into my friend Sarah Fisher's mother's dressing room one afternoon and seeing a small bottle of Joy perfume sitting there.² Sarah told me in hushed tones that it was very expensive, that her mother saved it for only the most special of occasions. We didn't try to sneak a dab for fear of being caught, or worse, dropping it and spilling it everywhere. We didn't go anywhere near it. We just whispered and admired it from a safe distance. In my mind's eye, I imagine this woman carrying in a quart sized bottle of Joy, unceremoniously breaking off the top and pouring out every last drop on Jesus' head. And yes, it is outrageous. Post that on EBay or Poshmark and turn a tidy profit and help the poor. Doesn't she know how many mouths could be fed; how many children saved? Instead, she pours it all out in one fell swoop. What a waste.

Clearly it is easy for me to feel sympathy for the dinner guests, a few of whom are probably disciples. They want to get it; they want to get Jesus. They want to show that they have been paying attention, and so do we. Time and time again, Jesus has made a point of drawing our attention to the needs of the least and the last, the forgotten, the poor, the orphans, and the widows. So when this woman walks in and wastes this expensive luxurious treasure on a one-time act—or even stunt, we're put out. We expect Jesus to be put out, too. And he isn't.

² The names have been changed.

The act of anointing was an ancient one, even in Mark's day. Generations before, when Israel begged God for a king, the prophet Samuel anointed Saul, setting him apart as God's chosen one. Later, Samuel anointed David. And no one muttered—not once. Here the unnamed woman plays the prophet's role and makes visible what God had always intended. Jesus is God's chosen one, *the* King of Kings, the Messiah—which means anointed one, and so he is anointed making God's claim visible to everyone gathered in that place. And it's more than that too, of course. Jesus claims that she is anointing him for burial. Burial—which will follow his death. She is performing a sacred service, something the community values and expects at the time of death, a death Jesus has told them is coming, a death not one of them wants to imagine, let alone witness.

This woman plays the role of prophet and even priest, setting Jesus apart as God's chosen one and preparing his body for the burial that awaits him, and there is still something more. The disciples have failed to understand who Jesus is all along. The outsiders have been the ones to get it—the demon possessed man and Bartimaeus for example. Even if this woman doesn't grasp all that Jesus is, all that he comes to do in its entirety, she is significantly closer than those closest to him. And in response, she has brought beauty into the room. Jesus says that she has done something good for him. The word can also mean beautiful, so this act is good in that it is lovely in and of itself. She has done something beautiful for Jesus in a time when beauty is hard to come by. As scholar Alice McKenzie writes:

[She] commits an act of kindness in a context of cruelty. She honors Jesus with an extravagant outpouring of herself that fills a room with sweet fragrance. Her action is an oasis of honor in a desert of plotting and brutality.³

Yes, the poor need to be fed and championed. Of course they do, and of course that is central and essential to the Christian community's calling. Jesus is in no way disputing that. He does value this fleeting moment of beauty and devotion and love along the way, however. We never learn this woman's name, but Jesus insists that what she has done be shared anywhere and everywhere the gospel is shared. Beauty and the gospel go hand in hand it seems, even when beauty is hard to come by, maybe especially when beauty is hard to come by.

Zainab Salbi has made it her life's mission to tell stories of hope from the most hopeless places, oases of honor in the midst of brutality and despair. A survivor of the wars in Iraq, Salbi tells of waking up to an explosion outside her window one morning. She recalls both her deep gratitude that her family was safe and her immense sadness that her neighbors were not. Inspired by her mother who performed puppet shows for her and her brothers during bombings so that they would not be afraid, in a Ted Talk from a few years ago, Zainab tells the stories of women who live behind the front lines. These women fear losing loved ones, and they also fear dying little by little, "from the inside out." And so—as my friend Mary Ann would say, these women fight back with beauty.⁴ Zainab tells of a music teacher in Sarajevo who braved snipers' bullets to keep her studio open every day during the four-year siege so that her students could continue playing violin, piano, and cello. She tells of a Palestinian

³ Alyce McKenzie, "Extravagant Holiness: Reflections on The Anointing at Bethany" From Edgy Exegesis found here: <https://www.patheos.com/resources/additional-resources/2012/03/extravagant-holiness-alyce-mckenzie-03-26-2012>

⁴ On her Facebook page a few years ago, Mary Ann stated, "We fight back with beauty. Show me some..." Her friends responded with images of baby eagles, sunsets, children playing, and church windows, just to name a few.

woman who ran out during a ceasefire to gather flowers to share with her neighbors along with home-baked bread just in case the ceasefire ended after one day. Zainab celebrates the women who dance and sing every day in an effort to bring beauty in the midst of horror, something lovely in the midst of devastation.⁵

These women know what the unnamed woman seems to know: beauty is never wasted. A beautiful act, fleeting as it may be, done for the sake of beauty and honor and care and love is always a good idea. And here, now in this room with Jesus it is more than a good idea, it is a faithful act of love and devotion. Another preacher noted that this is perhaps the only gentle and loving touch Jesus will experience this week:

Before the week is over, Jesus will be beaten, insulted, stripped and flogged, and on his way to a violent death. [This woman's] action is one of the few gestures of love that he will experience all week.⁶

Like a flower and a warm loaf of bread during a ceasefire, like a piano concerto in a war zone, this anointing, this perfume dripping down Jesus' forehead is an extravagant gift, an exquisite moment of kindness, compassion, honor, and beauty. This act will not stop the coming cruelty; the passage itself is bookended with plots to bring Jesus to his end. In the very next verse Judas, one of Jesus' own disciples, joins the plot to stop him. But for a moment, the world pauses—at least in that room—and our Savior is lavished with extravagant adoration, bathed in love and beauty.

Like Mrs. Fisher's bottle of Joy, this perfume has been saved for a special occasion. This unnamed woman grasps what we have only begun to understand. Our acts of service are something

⁵ http://www.ted.com/talks/zainab_salbi

⁶ <http://revgalblogpals.org/2016/03/15/narrative-lectionary-broken-things-mark-111-11-and-mark-141-9/>

we can control, something we can schedule and parcel out a drop at a time. Utter devotion leaves us a bit out of control. When we offer our beautiful gifts, when we pour out the perfume, we give away a bit of ourselves as well. There's no going back. This woman risks embarrassment and ridicule to interrupt an ordinary meal to offer an extraordinary gift for an extraordinary man. This man, this one who has already healed the broken, raised the dead, welcomed children, and turned the Temple on its head, this man will be utterly poured out himself in a few short days. He will face the very worst the world can offer. He will endure pain and humiliation, betrayal by those closest to him, and death on a criminal's cross all so that we might know that there is no limit to God's love for us, there is nothing God cannot redeem in us. The woman holds nothing back; neither does God.

In the midst of a broken and often ugly world, this same Savior still comes, even here, even now, offering nothing less than the entirety of his love and his life. We, too, are bookended by brutality and ugliness. Hatred, meanness, and fear saturate the very air we breathe. We could use a Savior right about now, and we could use some beauty, too. My guess is that we are holding on to something beautiful, something that could fill the air with a different fragrance, something that could press pause on the ugliness, if just for a moment. Maybe it is a word of forgiveness, a gesture of reconciliation, an apology, a word of praise, a reminder of love. My hunch is that we have tucked it away for a special occasion, protecting it, maybe hoping to protect ourselves, along with it. The Savior of the world has been broken and poured out for us. It's hard to imagine any time more special than this; we will not find anyone more special than him. What are we waiting for?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.