

Scriptures: Philippians 3:4b-14, John 12:1-11

Telling Time

Our journey through Lent is rapidly coming to a close. Next Sunday is Palm/Passion Sunday, when we'll remember again Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem while people shouted "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord," only to shout five days later, "Crucify Him!" Today we're going to look at an event in Scripture which takes place the week before Good Friday, and appears to be recorded in all four gospel accounts in one form or another – Jesus' anointing at Bethany by Mary. If you brought your Bible with you today, or have a Bible app handy, turn with me to John's gospel, chapter 12. We'll be looking at the first eleven verses today. I'm reading from the New International Version. **Read John 12:1-11.**

This event takes place within the last week or so of Jesus' life. John opens our passage telling us, "Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead," (Jn. 12:1). The Jewish way of calculating time isn't like ours. Our "day" starts at midnight, and runs until 11:59 pm, in the middle of the night. Jewish people count it from sundown to sundown. Remember in the story of Creation, way back in Genesis 1, the repetitive thing which is told about every single day of Creation? "And there was evening, and there was morning – the first, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth day," (Gen. 1:5b, 8b, 13, 19, 23, 31b). Six different times within the span of the first chapter of the Bible we're told this was the way of counting time.

"Six days before Passover," John says. Jesus and His disciples were gathered in the upper room on Maundy Thursday night to eat the Passover meal. So Passover starts Thursday night, going into Friday. And this anointing by Mary would have happened Friday night or sometime on Saturday – the day before Palm Sunday – and less than a week before Jesus' crucifixion.

Filled With The Fragrance

This dinner, "given in Jesus' honor," (verse 2) happens someplace near Lazarus' house, if not at his house, because we know "Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with Him." The Bible tells us that Lazarus and Jesus were good friends. When Jesus hears that Lazarus has died, He cries. The shortest verse in the Bible, "Jesus wept," (Jn. 11:35) is written in the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, after Lazarus had been buried in the tomb for four days.

The younger sister, Mary, is mentioned in the next verse. "Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped His

feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume,” (verse 3). This action of Mary, of pouring this perfume on Jesus has captivated my imagination this week, for many reasons. The smell. The cost. The act. The symbolism of it. I have to admit, church, I read this verse, and the first question that came to mind was, “What’s it smell like?” I did some reading online, and they say it smells, “earthy, aromatic, woody, musky.”

That’s not real descriptive is it? You can take that a lot of ways – especially this idea of “earthy,” sometimes it smells “earthy” out here in the spring and summertime! I wouldn’t think something that smells like manure would be much use as a perfume. So, I kept looking around to find out what nard smells like – I haven’t smelled it before – and finally found an article that talked about how it has a floral scent similar to lavender. That makes better sense, and is more descriptive, to me anyways, than saying something smells “earthy.” As it turns out, the smell of it would have lingered on Jesus’ feet, and in Mary’s hair for many days.

The Cost of Perfume

Something else which comes to mind is the cost of this perfume. When I was a young man – late teens to early 20’s – I wanted a bottle of Drakkar Noir. They had commercials on TV advertising this stuff, and it gave impressionable young minds the idea that if you wore it, you’d have the ladies eating out of your hand. Kids, when you see commercials like that, don’t believe them. Commercials are gimmicks to get people to buy a product that they often don’t need. Teslas and electric cars come to mind as a modern-day example. Anyhow, I’d look at the perfumes at Sears or JC Penney’s, and a small bottle of Drakkar Noir cost something like \$30 or \$40. They would have tester bottles sitting out so you could spray it and smell it. It smelled good, but with a price like that, I never bought it.

Maybe you’re wondering how much money the pint of nard cost Mary. Friends, I looked that up as well. The interesting thing about it is the location of where it’s grown. Nard comes from crushing the roots of the spikenard plant, and that plant grows only in the Himalayan mountains, at a height of 30,000 feet above sea level. The Himalayas are on the border of India and China. Think of the distance this would have had to travel to get into Mary’s hands! Surely it was expensive! I read a commentary where the cost was estimated at \$12,000 that Mary would have paid for just a pint – that’s two cups or a pound – of this liquid. That’s a lot of money! There’s a website out there that sells a pint of nard for \$1,000 if anyone’s interested in getting some.

We see what happens next in Scripture – “Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray Him, objected, ‘Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year’s wages!’” (verses 4 and 5). It’s pretty obvious that John wrote his gospel after the fact, isn’t it church? He says Judas Iscariot “was later to betray Jesus,” so it’s

a recounting of events which happened, rather than a play-by-play as it happens recording. What's Judas' complaint boil down to? What's his focus? Money.

Jesus to the Rescue

John even tells us, "he didn't say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it," (verse 6). This passage makes it pretty clear that Judas was dishonest, yet people must have thought he was trustworthy at the time, because they entrusted their finances to him. Jesus comes to Mary's rescue. "Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of My burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have Me," (verses 7 and 8). Jesus recognizes the need to help the poor, but He wants everyone to understand that Mary had the perfume for the purpose of anointing Him for His upcoming burial. This is the act I spoke of earlier.

We don't know where Mary got this perfume, how she got it. She may have used her inheritance to buy it. It could have been passed down in her family for a couple generations. It could have been her dowry – money set aside to give to a husband when she got married. Maybe it was her whole life's savings. Perhaps it's all she has to live on. What's she do with it? She pours it out on Jesus' feet. Nard was used as an ointment in the burial process because it cut down on the smell of decay. A commentary noted that the scent of it would have lingered on Jesus' body as He was arrested, beaten, and crucified. With every breath, Jesus remembered Mary's sacrifice for Him, as He was being sacrificed for her sins – and for yours and mine.

Notice how our passage today ends. "Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of Him but also to see Lazarus, whom He had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in Him," (verses 9-11). Here we are, a chapter after Jesus raised Lazarus from the grave, and the leaders of the religious establishment are making plans to execute him, too. John tells us they plan to kill Lazarus because so many Jews are following Jesus because of the raising of Lazarus back to life. God is the God of the living – Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb. I can't help but wonder if Lazarus was executed on Good Friday, or shortly thereafter to "get rid of the evidence," that Jesus could – and had – brought him back from the dead.

He's Worth It

Mary poured priceless perfume on the Savior's feet and washed them with her hair. She gave it to Jesus because it was the most valuable thing she had – and in her eyes, He was worth it. Is He worth it, church? Is He worth it to you today? What do we sacrifice today for Jesus? What are we willing to part with – to give up – to glorify Him?

Most people who claim to be Christians today live a pretty comfortable life, especially here in America. We live lives of convenience. We give what we want. We attend church whenever we want. We behave about however we want. Generally, we aren't called to give up much, or to really sacrifice anything. Yet there are followers of Jesus Christ in places like North Korea, China, Afghanistan, Russia, Ukraine, North Africa, and the Middle East, where being a Christian could cost them their lives. They'd give anything to be able to walk in our shoes, so to speak. If we were in their shoes, do you think we'd still have gone to church last Sunday? Would have we come to church today? How high a cost do you give to let your life – like Mary's – be filled with the fragrance of Jesus? Are you willing to pour out your most valuable, costly thing at His feet?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, when we see the body of Christ still broken in the world, help us meet it with lavish grace and pour ourselves out with extravagant love all for Your glory. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.