

Something Is Coming
The Rev. Amy Spagna
April 6, 2025 – Lent 5C
John 12:1-8

When I first read through the lessons for today, what stuck out in looking at them as a whole was the sense that they're collectively setting us up for something. Isaiah tells us God is about to do something new by making a path through the desert and giving God's people water "so that they might declare [God's] praise" (Isa 43:21, NRSV). Paul talks at length about how he considers his Jewish identity as nothing compared to his faith in Christ and his resulting desire to "know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death" (Phil 3:x, NRSV). And, finally, we have this episode from the Gospel of John where Jesus is anointed by his good friend Mary of Bethany in an action which is both extravagant and loving – and which is highly criticized.

The liturgical calendar also points squarely in the direction of a change looming just over the horizon. This fifth Sunday of six in Lent works a little like a hinge. It's where the turn toward Jerusalem and Jesus meeting the moment of Good Friday begins. All of the pieces, including the readings and the prayers, work together to give us the sense that something is about to happen. For example, you'll also hear in the Preface, which is the prayer that comes right before we sing the Sanctus, the line: "You bid your faithful people cleanse their hearts, and prepare with joy for the Paschal feast, that... they may come to the fullness of grace which you have prepared for those who love you."¹ This is no longer the ashy Lenten status quo. Change is coming, and we are being asked to turn in its direction, whether we like it or not.

¹ *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Publishing, 1979), 379.

This gospel lesson also works like a hinge. It sits on the edge between the two halves of John. It's yet another sign that points through Jesus, to God, and gives us a glimpse of the divine glory which is to come. Along with Jesus raising his friend Lazarus in the previous chapter, it's the second one which directly foreshadows Jesus' death and resurrection. It also sets us up for Judas' eventual betrayal of Jesus, thanks to the narrator's comment to the effect that he's not necessarily an upstanding citizen.

If we take it just by itself, it's kind of a weird story. Mary breaks an entire jar of nard, an extremely expensive imported perfume made from a specific member of the honeysuckle family, over Jesus' feet, and has to deal with Judas making snarky comments about what she's done. All four gospels have some version of it, which is a pretty strong indicator that *something* must have happened to generate the story. Comparing all of them, we find they're nearly identical. Matthew, Mark, and John all place it at roughly the same point in the narrative. Only John names the woman who anoints Jesus as his good friend Mary of Bethany. Matthew and Mark, and to some extent Luke as well, record Jesus' reaction to Judas' protest that they should have sold it and given the proceeds to the poor with a little bit more detail than John does: "But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial.'" (Mark 14:6-8, NRSV)

In every case, there's a stark contrast between how Judas and Mary respond to Jesus. "The objection in all the stories (except Luke) is now the waste of resources. People also knew about budgets then. Caring about the poor meant caring about the

bottom line. It looks like Jesus is taking the side of the rich... against those pleading for money for social justice. Some will be comfortable seeing here a Jesus claiming his worthiness to be the recipient of lavish expenditure... But the real focus is the woman. Can we not let her response stand? It is not that we should see it as stroking the ego of Jesus, but rather as indicative of her response, indeed, to God. A person is responding to love and acceptance. It is not the time to talk budgets, but to value the person."²

And what's the end result of valuing the budget over people?

For Judas, it's what led to the narrator's comment that he would steal money from the disciples' common funds. His frustration level with Jesus is also getting pretty close to boiling over at this point, which will shortly lead to his decision to betray Jesus to the authorities. For us... well, we don't have to look very far to find examples of what happens when we value the bottom line over the people standing right in front of us. On a small scale, we've all done it, or been on the receiving end of some variation on: "no, sorry, can't afford that" or "why did you do that, we can't afford it." Jesus' words to Judas here push back on that idea. Effectively he says NO, we can afford the extravagance since it is offered out of love – the very kind Jesus himself will show to the world when he is lifted high on the cross. This sort of thing has always been subversive. It stands in direct opposition to the exercise of raw power the cross symbolized. It also says, very clearly, that the small, individual things we do to honor one another matter a great deal indeed.

² William Loader, "First Thoughts on Year C Gospel Passages from the Lectionary: Lent 5." <https://billloader.com/LkLent5.html> [accessed March 31, 2025].

In a talk he gave to a group of newly ordained clergy some years after he retired, Archbishop Michael Ramsey framed the truth that the little things are supremely important, in this way:

"But consider: the glory of Christianity is its claim that small things really matter and that the small company, the very few, the one man, the one woman, the one child are of infinite worth to God. Consider our Lord himself. Amidst a vast world with its vast empires and vast events and tragedies our Lord devoted himself to individual men and women, often giving hours and time to the very few or to the one man or woman. In a country where there were movements and causes which excited the allegiance of many – the Pharisees, the Zealots, the Essenes, and others – our Lord gives many hours to one woman of Samaria, one Nicodemus, one Martha, one Mary, one Lazarus, one Simon Peter, for the infinite worth of the one is the key to the Christian understanding of the many."³

³ Michael Ramsey, *The Christian Priest Today* (reprint, Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 42.