

April 7, 2019
Fifth Sunday in Lent
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Isaiah 43:16-21
Psalm 126
Philippians 3:4b-14
John 12:1-8

Each one of the canonical Gospels is different from the other three; few of the stories told about Jesus are included in all four Gospels. One of those few is the story about a woman anointing Jesus. From Gospel to Gospel, the details vary: the timing within the broader narrative; the identity of the woman; whether she anoints Jesus' head or his feet; the nature of Judas' objection. Even so, with relatively slight variations, the Anointing Woman is there, in all her surprising brilliance.

Because the story is in all four Gospels, it carries authority. It carries authority as *history*: the repetition makes Jesus' literal anointing by a woman more likely to be historically factual. Somewhat independent of its historicity, it also carries authority as *theology*: all four Gospel communities must have understood this story as saying something important about Jesus, and therefore as saying something important about God.

Here's an important point: if the *story* carries authority, then the *Anointing Woman* must also carry authority. For certain, she lived at a time when women were seldom accorded authority. That is to say, she *lived*. Throughout history and across cultures, women have seldom been accorded authority. What was true in the Anointing Woman's time remains true today. Women were and are subject to dis-empowerment that is even more essential than authority: throughout history and across cultures, women have seldom been accorded basic agency over their own bodies and voices.

In her time, the Anointing Woman possessed remarkable authority; over time, her authority has lapsed. We can try and help give her what she is due, historically and theologically, by asking *ourselves* what her story might be saying about Jesus, and therefore about God.

For the current liturgical year our primary Gospel is Luke, but today we shift over to John. The reading we just heard is particularly fitting for the Sunday before Palm Sunday. In the Gospel of John, as in our liturgies, Jesus will go from here, to the "triumphal entry," to the passion, to the cross.

In John's Gospel, the woman who anoints Jesus is Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem for the Passover, and he has stopped off at the home of his friends. Twice in John's Gospel, the three siblings from Bethany help the narrative look forward. Earlier, the resurrection of Lazarus foreshadowed the resurrection of Jesus; because Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, Lazarus is also a hunted man. Now, this dinner party foreshadows many things: the last supper; Jesus washing his disciples' feet; Judas' betrayal; Jesus' death; the anointing of Jesus' body. *This* story works a bit like a magnifying glass, taking all that in, pulling together, and bringing it into focus, on Jesus' feet.

Besides looking forward, the story also looks backward, to the anointing of kings in the Hebrew Scriptures. “The christ,” means, literally, “the anointed one.” “Jesus the Christ” is “Jesus the Anointed One.” Samuel anointed David to make David king—though Samuel anointed David’s head, not his feet. If in that earlier story the protagonist is identified as “the prophet Samuel,” then maybe it’s fair in this story to identify our protagonist as “the prophet Mary.”

One of the marks Mary obviously shares with her predecessor prophets is the practice of crossing boundaries—and of crossing those boundaries despite societal limitations and the self-doubt that comes with them. The prophet is never the person *we* would pick out from the crowd. Knowing that, and giving her the benefit of *our* doubt, we might see in Mary other qualities of the prophet. The prophet observes God working in new and surprising ways, and hears God speak truths that others miss. The prophet then brings God’s message to reluctant ears, risking safety and security to do so. In the Hebrew Scriptures, God’s message is so often about turning back to God after having gone astray; and that is so often about care and concern for those at the margins. Of course this theme continues in the New Testament.

Samuel was a king-maker, and Mary is a king-maker, too, though she is making a different kind of king. With the perception of a prophet, Mary recognizes Jesus as the messiah, a messiah who is not what people are expecting. With the courage of a prophet, Mary then makes Jesus not only king but also Christ, the anointed one. In a twist, Mary anoints Jesus, not as Samuel anointed David, but rather in a new way. Mary had prepared to anoint Jesus’ dead body; instead she anoints his living feet, marking the king as a servant, the one who walks with and for, the feet of God placed on the paths of the world. This story foreshadows Jesus’ death; maybe it also foreshadows his resurrection—his return to walk the earth, and continuing walking he does through his followers.

In the story, Mary anoints Jesus’ feet with something called *nard*. Nard, or spikenard, is an oil that is processed from a plant that grows in the Himalayas. It was used as a perfume, for cooking, in herbal medicine, and as an ingredient in Jewish Temple incense. Because it was imported from afar, nard would have been terrifically expensive. Think maybe twenty- or twenty-five thousand dollars for the pound that went onto Jesus’. To contain it and preserve its scent, it was stored in impermeable boxes carved from alabaster stone and sealed with wax. When a box was first broken open, the scent would have been nearly overpowering.

Feet, hands, hair, perfumed oil—this story is so very physical. It’s luxuriously physical, almost *frighteningly* physical. To acknowledge its physicality is to acknowledge our own vulnerability. As the story hearkens backward and forward along the Biblical narrative, it also hearkens backward and forward along our own narratives. It reminds us of our own miraculous birth and ultimate death; it reminds us of the limited time we have in-between.

We hear the stories of the Bible over and over again. After a while, I suspect our tendency is to cease paying full attention. I think we hear the beginning of the story and then we skip to the end without really hearing the middle. If we miss what’s in-between, we miss the details that make the story truly ours; after all, what’s in-between informs our in-between. It’s the in-between that truly counts.

To its early hearers, the story of the Anointing Woman would have been boundary-blowing and mind-blowing. Listen carefully, and it still is. As the United Congregational Church slogan says, “God is still speaking.” We need only to listen. Listen like Mary of Bethany; listen like a prophet. Listen to what God is saying new, now. Listen, so that you can hear, and speak, and do.