

"Preparing for Death"
The 5th Sunday in Lent – April 7, 2019 – John 12:1-8/C

The preacher's task is often full of twists and turns. For example, how does one choose what this congregation needs to hear on this day in this place? What interesting information from the Bible and our experience will lead to a gospel message that moves your heart? With a veritable buffet of themes, how can we cover it all? For example, today we are sensing increasing danger for Jesus, we have the first hint about Judas' heart and motivations, there is a comment about the constancy of poverty, the relationship between siblings, an intimate dinner with family and friends, and the overwhelming smell of anointing oil. And then (often in a serendipitous thought) comes the aha! moment. Today, for me, it was a random echo from the truly wonderful movie, The Princess Bride, when Mandy Patinkin finally confronts the enemy he has been tracking throughout the whole movie. He has been practicing what he will say when they finally come face to face, and in their climactic swordfight, he gets his chance: *"Hello. My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die!"*

So, if you were God, how would you prepare humanity for Jesus' death? We understand (as they did) that life is an endless struggle *against* death. Our hearts fear it, our lives deny it, our culture tells us we can beat it. And yet, deep down we know, we **will** experience it. Death is a human preoccupation, and even the church marks its reality every year with a 40-day ritual called Lent (which most folks find depressing.) Why? Because it's about death. It begins with crosses of ash smeared upon your forehead, and the admonition to, *"Remember that you are dust, and into dust you shall return,"* saying, essentially, *"Don't forget. You're going to die."* Then, Lent ends with Jesus' Passion (the story of his final days,) and his death on Good Friday. And yes, that part is depressing enough.

Now, you may have noticed that we have left our reading along in Luke to listen to the story from John, who is clear in his Gospel that Jesus is the Son, the essence, the beloved of God. So how does Jesus prepare himself, and his Creation for death? Well, not unlike us, he seeks the familiar. Jesus goes "home."

Since the Festival of Dedication (Hanukkah) Jesus and the 12 had been gone - gone back to where it all began, where Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan, and where John the Baptizer had proclaimed, *"Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"* Jesus' ministry had thus begun. From that place in the Jordan River valley, they had returned to Jerusalem only once, because Jesus' beloved friend Lazarus had died. I have often said, *"Death isn't death to God, it is the stuff of new life,"* and Jesus knew that Lazarus' death would provide the "stuff" of new life. And yet that was not too clear to Martha and Mary who engaged Jesus who finally said, *"I AM the Resurrection and Life."*

That should have settled any discussion, yet even so – death got the best of them – with anger, fear and grieving! The **sisters** were angry. The **crowd**, filled with sorrow and suffering. **Even Jesus** was "deeply distracted" and broke down and wept. And then he raised Lazarus from the dead.

Now Jesus, the Twelve, even Lazarus, were in danger; but Jerusalem beckoned; everyone wondered if the Rabbi and his followers would dare return for the Festival. And then Jesus arrived in Bethany - **six days before** The Passover - on the day that Passover lambs were purchased for sacrifice; and taken into the home to inspect for blemishes. The first thing to be done? Clean them, brush them and rub oil on their feet.

You know, it must have been a wonderful reunion, sitting again at Martha's table. Had they even had time to visit about the restoration of brother, Lazarus? Or to find out Jesus' plans for the Festival? Did they know of any rumblings of violence in and around Jerusalem? Dinner conversation: full of funny moments, *"do you remember the time we..."* politics and religion and their connection to one another. These were good times with host Martha at the head, and Lazarus at the foot of the table. And as dinner was winding down – a hush – (like the moment before the turkey, the Christmas pudding, or the birthday cake is revealed,) Mary comes to the table with an alabaster jar of perfumed ointment. It was oil of spikenard, used for one of two purposes only: anointing a King, or a dead body.

Mary kneels down and begins to rub the oil into Jesus' feet. It is difficult to hear this story without raising an eyebrow. At the very least, Mary's use of her unbound hair is one of profound intimacy, the

loosening of long hair reserved only for wives and husbands. Yes, this is an expression of love so deep that it causes us to feel the need to avert our eyes, to look away. This exchange is not for us...

Mary kneels down and begins to rub the oil into Jesus' feet – and on the 6th day before Passover, the Lamb is being prepared for sacrifice.

Professor Karoline Lewis shares her thoughts (paraphrased): I wonder if this moment reminded Jesus of his mother. Three years ago at a wedding in Cana. His mother, who loved him, who knew him and what he was capable of doing...He resists, but because of her encouragement, Jesus realizes the time really has come. Because of her love, Jesus can do what he was sent to do...Here in Bethany, Jesus needs that same encouragement, and love, to make it possible for him to show the same – by washing the feet of his disciples, surrendering to betrayal, arrest, and denial, carrying his own cross, dying, rising, and ascending - Mary loves Jesus into *"Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."*

So, this is how you prepare for death – an act of candid, selfless love at a time when it is needed most. Imagine hearing God in human form say, *"You will not always have me?"* Mary had just lost her brother; now she needed to let another man know how deeply she loved him, before the last opportunity slipped away. And you? What act of love needs doing before it slips away from you?

As you come or go from the table of grace this day, pause at the baptismal font, dip your finger in the bowl of oil, and rub it into the back of your hand. Let the perfumes of frankincense and myrrh fill this place, and be carried on your skin – with you throughout your day. In this way, prepare your heart for what is to come – life, death and new life.

Breathe in the Holy Spirit and the aroma of love from the One who gave his life in sacrifice - for us. Amen.

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Resources: *The Princess Bride* (1987); Lindsey Trozzo for *Working Preacher.com*, Karoline Lewis for *Day1.org*; John 1:29