

John 12:1-19
Again & Again, We Draw on Courage
Palm Sunday ~ March 28, 2021
The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction to Text

Our second lesson picks up the next day in John 12, beginning at verse 12. Freshly anointed in a most unusual and spectacular manner, by his wise and courageous friend Mary, Jesus and his disciples head into the great city of Jerusalem. Now it is five days before the Feast of Passover. Jews are flocking in droves to Jerusalem for the biggest religious holiday of the year. You can imagine why Passover celebrations made the Roman officials nervous. Big crowds of people gathering to celebrate a holiday celebrating the power of God to free them from the bondage of slavery. If the Romans had a National Guard, it would have been called in. Even Pilate came pre-emptively to Jerusalem for Passover just in case trouble might be brewing. Perhaps he knew more than he let on. Grab your palms and here we go: take courage as you see Jesus ride into town.

Sermon

When was the last time you shouted? Really shouted? At a Packers game when they scored a winning touchdown in the final seconds of the fourth quarter? (Remember when we could go to games?) Or maybe at a Brewers game in extra innings or a Badgers game in overtime. What about the last time you were riding a coaster and it just dropped down from the sky? We also shout when we see our child about to do something that looks dangerous, warning them, “Watch out!” Anger brings out the shouts, too. Especially at the people we love the most... maybe words we’d rather not repeat in church. Some of us shout when we feel a sudden shot of pain, whether from a bike crash or a bout of arthritis acting up: the volume goes up and an unusual sound issues forth. Although this has been a year without the chance to shout *inside* a sports arena, this has been a year where many of us have raised our voices outside while peacefully protesting racial injustice in our country. Whether it is from excitement, anger, pain, protest or fear—when we are feeling something intensely, deeply, sometimes we shout. Whether we want to, or not.

Today is a loud, shouting kind of Sunday. We call it Palm Sunday. The first day of Holy Week. Likely the crowning inflection point that accelerated the timeline for Jesus’ execution to Friday of that very week. What was all the excitement about, anyway? How could this crowd go from practically crowning him today to shouting on Friday for his execution? We can’t know for sure. But we do know it was a crazy, intense, confusing time.

When they were shouting their “Hosannas” many in the crowd thought that Jesus was finally getting on track to save them the way they expected him to. “Hosanna” was a traditional festal cry found in the Psalms, used in Passover celebrations. “Hosanna” is a Hebrew word that translates as “Save us now!” Perhaps they were shouting, “Hosanna!” because they thought with Jesus coming into Jerusalem, he would bring back the good old days like the time of King David, when they had political power and were not under the thumb of Rome and the Roman Empire. Time to get that back. Everybody wants to be a superpower. Maybe they thought Jesus

would make that happen for them. Yay! Back to the good old days. Hosanna! Hosanna! Save us now! (Not later). Make us rich and powerful and at the top again.

What they didn't quite realize that Jesus was actually staging a protest parade. The Jesus they are imagining, is not the Jesus who is riding into town on a borrowed young donkey. Not a stallion. That parade with stallions and military splendor was happening on the other side of town, where the Roman Empire was displaying a show of power to head off any possible upstart rebellion by the Passover crowd. I want to be clear that Jesus was not protesting against Judaism. Jesus was a part of Judaism. Jesus was protesting a system that coopted the name of God to justify a politically oppressive regime.

Our first lesson, the anointing at Bethany, is a story told in all four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Each version varies slightly and it is easy to conflate them in our memory. What all four versions share is the extravagance of the ointment, a woman anointing Jesus with it, someone complaining, and Jesus coming to her defense. In John it is Mary, the sister of Martha who does the anointing, and Judas, the Treasurer and soon to be the betrayer, who does the complaining. Mary taking a bold and costly action. Loud in a different way.

In John's narrative, this story comes right on the heels of another loud stench: the four-day dead body of Lazarus, that Martha points out to Jesus just after he had asked them to "Take away the stone" of the tomb where Lazarus' dead body had been laid to rest four days earlier. In John's telling, our sense of smell leads the way from the stench of death to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Mary's loud statement tickles the inside of everyone's noses with delight. And they are shocked. What is she doing? She is wiping the perfume on Jesus' feet with her hair. The verb *ekmasso* "to wipe" is the same verb used to describe Jesus washing the feet of the disciples at the Last Supper. This story is setting us up for the Last Supper and the burial of Jesus. The extravagant amount and quality of oil she is using, a pound of pure nard proclaims the message of God's love and grace poured out for all.

I must speak to one other piece of this anointing story that has been misused and misinterpreted. Jesus statement to Judas, "You always have the poor with you" (John 12:8a) have been used a justification for ignoring the poor and dismissing the problem of poverty as unsolvable. This is *not* what Jesus meant—and serves as a good example of the grave and serious danger of taking one sentence from the Bible out of context and drawing a moral or position from it. So, what is Jesus saying here? He is actually drawing from his own scriptures and ours, Deuteronomy 15:11, where it is written, "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land." It is our mandate to care for those whom God cares. Jesus, like his fellow Jews, would of course have expected people to help support the poor.¹ Jesus' point, was to affirm Mary's gift of seizing the moment, of knowing what that moment called for. This was her last chance to be with Jesus. The irony of John's gospel shines forth in this story: again the disciples did not really know what was going on, but Mary did and does the right thing. The thing she can do in the moment that she has. Extravagant attention. Loud, in your face, well—in your nose—nard, or spikenard Essential oil and highly prized perfume.

The story of Mary's anointing and Jesus' entry into Jerusalem are big moments in the life of Christ. We see their courage and marvel. Yet the choice to take courage is one we are called to make in small ways almost every day, too. Sometimes just getting up out of bed and facing the challenge of the day, takes courage. I want to share a story a member of our church emailed me last week because it is a story of how God supplies courage right when we need it. Here is what they wrote, *"I am closely watching the Lenten book that was mailed the beginning of lent. One of days was to pick a bible verse and recite it all day long. I thought, it will be hard to find one, and went to work and didn't think about it too much after that. I was then working with a stack of checks and one rejected in my machine. Sure enough, it had a Bible verse written on it that said "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go." Joshua 1:9. So many miracles, just when you need them. Sometimes God just knows when you need Him. Work sometimes is so challenging, that I really needed that verse at that time! I did recite it all day after that.*

What is the boat of fear, anxiety, or dis-courage-ment this is stopping up your Suez Canal that is God's healing light and mercy? Whatever you are feeling, we know that all the prophets through ages have wrestled with these feelings, too. In Joan Chittister's book, *The Time is Now: A Call to Uncommon Courage*, she writes, "We are not all prophets, by a long shot. But we are all meant to be carriers of the same prophetic message to our time. In our place, *wherever* God has planted us." If it is working at a bank in Spencer, teaching in a school in Marshfield, raising a family on the edge of town, looking for a new job anywhere, or discovering what life after retirement is calling us to. Wherever we are, whatever stage in life we may be, Sister Joan writes, "We are all meant to be committed to a kind of prophetic spirituality that cries out against the loud, clear message of God to a skewed and unjust world." She cuts to the chase with this zinger: "Faith is invalid, unless you are living it."ⁱⁱ Isn't that what Jesus taught us in Matthew 25?

So here is our challenge and our call. One I hear as I see Jesus riding through the crowd on a borrowed donkey, valiantly, quietly, deliberately toward the Temple in Jerusalem. Use your voice, your sphere of influence, to bring the healing light of justice wherever, however we can. If we are Christ followers, we cannot fall back from his path this final week: The Holy Week that Jesus' protest march and political action led directly to his execution. We could choose to raise no voice at all in the pursuit of God's will for us all. That kind of shouting can be risky. But this is our time to use our voice to do something to reshape the heart and the soul of the worlds we inhabit. For us, it probably isn't nard, but what is it?

The Talmud, teaches us that those who risk nothing, risk much more. I believe this holds true at the personal level: our relationships with others and with ourselves, as well as at the community level: for us as a church, and for us a nation, one nation in the global community. If we risk nothing and choose to keep our heads down and our mouths closed, our relationships will not have a chance of growing deeper. If we keep our heads down for fear of upsetting the status quo, which is sometimes mistaken for "disturbing the peace," bad problems will not go away. They will get worse. This past week serves one grim and heart-breaking example: if we do nothing more than offer our "thoughts and prayers," more innocent people will die from mass

shootings while just going to the grocery store, or going to work, or to school. This is not what Jesus died for.

Jesus came to Jerusalem that day, riding on humble beast of burden, feet still emanating a faint, but distinct aroma of nard, to show us how to face the darkness without fear. To show us what Love looks like. He headed straight into the halls of power and corruption with quiet, undeterrable resolve. So that we could carry that Divine Light into wherever we are. What does courage look like? What does courage sound like? Sometimes its loud and sometimes its quiet. I will give Amanda Gorman, the first person to be named National Youth Poet Laureate, the last word for my Palm Sunday sermon today. In these lines excerpted from her poem, “The Hill We Climb,” I see Mary at the dinner table in Bethany courageously anointing Jesus for burial as he faces his final week. In these lines I see Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a young donkey, heading toward a place none of us wants to go. In her poem I hear echoes of the prophets from Moses to Jesus: marching orders that will carry us through.

*When day comes we ask ourselves,
Where can we find light in this never-ending shade?
The loss we carry,
a sea we must wade
We’ve braved the belly of the beast
We’ve learned that quiet isn’t always peace
And the norms and notions
of what just is
Isn’t always just-ice
And yet the dawn is ours...
We will not be turned around
or interrupted by intimidation
Because we know our inaction and inertia
will be the inheritance of the next generation
Our blunders become their burdens
But one thing is certain:
If we merge mercy with might,
and might with right,
then love becomes our legacy
and changes our children’s birthright...
When day comes we step out of the shade,
aflame and unafraid
The new dawn blooms as we free it
For there is always light,
if only we’re brave enough to see it
If only we’re brave enough to be it.*

ⁱ Amy-Jill Levine, *Entering the Passion of Jesus: A Beginner’s Guide to Holy Week*, (Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 2018), p. 101.

ⁱⁱ Joan Chittister, *The Time is Now: A Call to Uncommon Courage*, (Convergent Books: New York, NY, 2019), p. 29.