

Sermon Notes – April 6, 2025
The Holy Gospel of St. John 12: 1-8
Peace Lutheran Church
“All Things New”

Today's gospel moves from Luke to John; it follows the raising of Lazarus and immediately precedes the triumphal entry. Like the forthcoming Maundy Thursday reading, it sets a foot-washing of sorts amid an intimate gathering of friends. Here, though, it is Mary who cares for Jesus' feet, but rather than washing Jesus' feet, she anoints them. Anointing feet is a strange action-unlike anointing someone's head, it will not have a lasting effect. It only makes sense as a burial custom, when the recipient will no longer use his feet, as Jesus points out at the end of the reading. Further, in anointing Jesus' feet and wiping them with her hair, Mary manages to anoint herself - this may be a subtle way of noticing that honoring Jesus results in a blessing to the worshiper.

It is difficult, however, to escape the last line of the story. Its second half is untrue - Jesus is with us forever, as He promises in the final discourse; the first half however is hard-hearted. One explanation for it may be the rabbinic tradition that good works related to mercy (burial anointing among them) were superior to good works related to justice (alms-giving, for instance). Or it may be a smack down of Judas's attempt at embezzlement. Or it may be that Jesus is inoculating His followers against the notion that any devotion shown to God and caring for the needy is, in fact, one and the same, and as such assuring it is possible to carry out both. Or it may be that this is a unique instance, in which care for Jesus' soon-to-be-corpse has priority. But John does not point us to any of these interpretations, and lets the statement close out the story.

The first reading is astonishing. Isaiah tells his hearers that the exodus, the central moment of their history, the defining moment of liberation and nation-molding, is about to be upstaged in their own experience. The return from exile will be another and, indeed, a greater Day of the Lord. As we reach toward the great Three Days, that is a word for us as well. Jesus' Passover from life to death is an even greater act of liberation than the Red Sea or the return from Babylon. And our own rescue from death, sin, and despair, in our baptism and our return to baptism, is similarly a Day of the Lord.

In the gospel reading, both Jesus and Mary demonstrate humility - Jesus in His ultimate self-emptying leading to his death, and Mary in her costly service. Paul in the second reading demonstrates humility as well, recognizing that all the lines on his resume in which he could have boasted are useless (and indeed worse than useless if he looked to them rather than the gift of God for self-worth). He offers one more way that God uses our suffering: by it we share the experience of a seemingly abandoned Jesus and a betrayed and ignored Creator, and understand unmerited grace better and better.