

Silver, Palms, and Oil  
John 12:1-8, 12-19  
Palm Sunday, April 10, 2022 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC  
Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

Palm Sunday is one of my favorites every year, because I love the children's parade around the church. One children's parade, from when I was at the Meredith church, is one of my favorite church memories of all time. The children were marching around the church just as ours did this morning, representing the crowds that followed Jesus into Jerusalem from the East. I had learned my lesson in a previous disaster and had gotten an adult to come along behind the parade to prevent escapes. Half the church was singing, "We Are Marching in the Light of God," as we did this morning. At the same time, from the other direction and unbeknownst to the children, came four large men from the congregation. They all had military experience, or at least military fantasies, so they knew how to march and how to appear menacing. They were playing the Roman army that was entering Jerusalem from the West on the very same day, and the soldiers and the other half of the congregation were singing the evil emperor's theme from Star Wars. The whole church was filled with a cacophony of clashing music.

Can you picture it? Children coming down one aisle toward the front, "soldiers" marching down the other aisle toward the front. We did fine at first. The kids were mostly too short to see over the ends of the pews, and they were being proud of themselves for being in the parade and trying to keep control of their palms, so they weren't thinking about very much else. Then we all got to the front of the church and turned the corner toward the center at the same time. I was at the front of the children's parade, so I saw them first. I saw that the soldiers had each picked up a snow shovel from the narthex, and they were carrying them upside down, as both armor for their chests and a weapon if needed. I got the giggles. I was laughing so hard that I wasn't anticipating how the children would respond when they saw the same thing. When the kids turned the corner, too, they saw the menacing Roman soldiers looking so completely weird with the snow shovels, and the littlest ones got really scared. The whole children's parade dissolved into chaos, with children scattering everywhere, laughing or crying, depending on their ages.

It was a little like that first palm parade, actually, when Jesus entered Jerusalem all those years ago. Joyful chaos on one side, military menace on the other, and total confusion in between.

The Gospel of John tells the story differently from the other gospels, of course. This gospel presents that whole last week of Jesus' life as a response to his raising Lazarus from the dead. It was a stunning act, and word gets around quickly. The religious leaders, who are responsible to the Roman rulers for keeping things under control, determine that Jesus must be put to death, and that leads directly to the crucifixion that we will hear about on Thursday evening this week.

But before that we have this beautiful scene in which Mary anoints Jesus' feet with costly perfumed oil, called "nard," and dries his feet with her hair. It is such a personal, intimate act of caring, and it has symbolic significance. Judas, the treasurer for the disciples, the one who keeps the common purse, says immediately that this expensive perfume should have been sold and the money given to the poor. The Gospel of John suggests that Judas was a thief and wanted to keep the money for himself, but let's give Judas the benefit of the doubt this morning. Let's assume he really wanted all their resources to go toward helping poor people, and this perfume, this anointing seemed like a terrible waste to him. Jesus takes Mary's side saying, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

The next day, Jesus and the disciples enter Jerusalem, and a spontaneous parade forms around them, waving palm branches. People come out to see Jesus because he has done this wonderful miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead. The parade has all the symbols associated with Jewish nationalism and the crowd is getting more and more excited. Both the nationalistic symbols and the excited crowds are a threat to Roman rule, and that means they are also threatening to the religious leaders whose job it is to quell the crowds on behalf of the Romans.

Here we have three different responses to the Lazarus miracle. Let's look at each in turn.

Judas sees this amazing miracle of new life and immediately wants to get back to business, back to doing the work that he believes Jesus has called them to do – taking care of people who are poor, people who can't feed or house themselves, people who are homeless and desperately in need of help. Let's assume Judas means it. Let's not hold his later betrayal against him in this story as the gospel writer has done. Let's assume Judas really believes that the disciples' priority should be helping poor people. I have a lot of sympathy for Judas in this story. His argument is one I have made myself. We should put all our resources – both personally and as a church – as many resources as we can possibly scrape together, into the soup kitchen and the food pantry. We should give programs like that priority for use of our building because Jesus said, "Feed my sheep," and I take that literally. Many of you have heard me make those arguments in cabinet meetings and elsewhere. Judas's argument here is the same as the one I have made: Take the perfume and convert it to a lot of silver. Give the silver to people who are poor. As Christians, how can we argue with that?

But Mary sees things differently. This is Mary, the sister of Martha. Mary, who sat with Jesus and listened to his teachings while Martha was in the kitchen getting dinner ready. Mary, who heard the heart of Jesus' teachings when others did not. Mary, whose brother Lazarus has just been raised from the dead. She knows what a miracle this was, because it was her own personal miracle. Her brother, whom she had lost and grieved, her own brother has been given new life. And Mary understands immediately that this act of love and power will soon lead to Jesus' death. Mary, who has just experienced this terrible loss and then the amazing gift of life and love come again, knows what it will be like to lose Jesus, too, and she responds from a deep place of mourning. She takes this costly perfume that she has saved even after her own brother's death, and she begins to anoint Jesus' feet, filling the whole house with its scent. Judas objects, but Jesus says, "Leave her alone. I won't be here forever."

Then we have the crowds that come to meet Jesus as he enters Jerusalem the next day. They want to see the one who has saved Lazarus from death, and they hope that means he can save them as well. One meaning of "Hosanna" is "save us!" Save us! Get these Romans off our backs. We see the donkey, the sign of the king. The scriptures prove you are the one we have been waiting for, the one who can save us. We are ready to march with you. Save us!

Three different responses to a miracle – silver, palms, and oil. Judas wants to put the miracle aside and get back to the business of their ministry. The people in the streets are ready to crown Jesus king so he will save them as the scriptures have promised. Both of these are potentially faithful responses to the miracle of raising Lazarus from death to life. But only Mary understands. Only Mary sees, because she sees with her heart, what it has cost for Jesus to give her this gift, this brother whom she loved, back to her. Only Mary knows that it will cost Jesus his own life. And so, she gives the gift she can – the scented oil she has saved for this day, her hair, her tears, her love.

Amen