



Temple Baptist Church
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Beauty amid Treachery
Mark 14:1-11

It's a beautiful story, isn't it?

Whenever I read or hear this text, my mind is drawn to the centerpiece of it—this amazing act of the unnamed woman.

Now each of the four Gospel accounts has a story like this one, with a woman anointing Jesus with a costly precious fragrant oil. Matthew's account is nearly identical to Mark's. There are some significant differences in John's story, but it seems to tell us about the same incident, and identifies the woman as Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. It's pretty clear that Luke's story is about a different incident altogether.

This story in our text is a story that's worth repeating. In fact, Jesus said that wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what this woman had done would **be told as a memorial to her** (14:9).¹

We know what she did—at about the mid-point of the last week of Jesus' earthly life, while He was reclining at the table for a meal in the house of Simon the Leper, she took **an alabaster flask of very costly oil of spikenard** (14:3). She broke the neck off the flask and poured the fragrant oil—all of it—over Jesus' head.

To give you a sense of just how expensive this ointment was, it was worth more than 300 denarii. A denarius was the daily wage for a laborer. So 300 denarii amounted to about a year's wages.

It was a beautiful act on her part. But it elicited an indignant reaction from those who were there. Some of them (Matthew tells us they were some of Jesus' disciples; John tells us that it was Judas Iscariot in particular) became very angry and complained that this act was *a waste*. The perfume could have been sold for a year's wages, and the proceeds given to the poor. Her act was simply too *extravagant*.

That's what she did. *But what did it mean?*

Putting things in context . . .

Some years ago, I was working with this text in preparation for a Palm Sunday sermon. I had originally planned to deal only with verses 3-9, which tell about the anointing.

Looking at the story that way, it seems to be about the beauty of this woman's act. It was truly an amazingly extravagant expression of her love for and devotion to Jesus. Can you imagine how long it would have taken for her to save up the money for a flask of fragrant oil that cost a year's wages? No wonder it cost that much—it was made of pure spikenard, which came from eastern India.

Here in this awesome act of adoration she poured it on Jesus to show her great love for Him. When the disciples complained that it was a waste, Jesus came to her defense. He told them

(14:6-9):

“Let her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a good work for Me (RSV, ESV and NIV: a beautiful thing). For you have the poor with you always, and whenever you wish you may do them good; but Me you do not always have. She has done what she could. She has come beforehand to anoint My body for burial. Assuredly I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her.”

Now that’s pretty straightforward, isn’t it? She took the kind of perfume that you saved for your dearest family members to anoint their corpses for burial to disguise the putrid odor of decay as their bodies would start to decompose, and she lavished it on Jesus.

Whether she realized what she was doing or not, the meaning Jesus assigned to her act was that she was anointing His body beforehand for His burial. And her extravagant act would **be told as a memorial to her** wherever the gospel would be preached. In fact, we’re doing that here again today.

It follows, then, doesn’t it, that we should express our love for Jesus with the same kind of extravagance—that we should be willing to pour out ourselves and all we have for Him just as the woman poured out her precious perfume? You can get a pretty good sermon out of that!

But as I looked at the broader context of this passage I realized that verses 1-2 and 10-11 are integral parts of *this* story. They don’t look like it at first, but they actually form a bracket around the anointing story, so that what the woman did is set in the midst of the treacherous intentions of the chief priests and scribes (the teachers of the law) on the one hand and the treacherous betrayal by Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, on the other.

Now all that throws this story into a different light, doesn’t it? There’s something much bigger going on here than just the extravagant expression of the woman’s love and devotion, beautiful and moving as that may be.

The Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were just two days away. A few days earlier, on Sunday, Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey, with people spreading their cloaks and palm branches in the street to carpet the path. Those who were going ahead of Him and those who were following shouted (Mark 11:9-10):

**Hosanna!
Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!
Blessed is the kingdom of our father David
That comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest!**

The next day, Jesus cleansed the temple, clearing out those who were buying and selling there. It was after this that the chief priests and scribes decided for sure to do what they had been thinking about doing all along. They began to look for a way to *eliminate* Jesus.

Throughout the week there were several encounters between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders. They tried to catch Him in His words and challenge His authority. But He remained steadfast in fulfilling the Father’s purpose, knowing that this last week in Jerusalem would culminate in His suffering, death, and resurrection.

So it was in this context that just two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread the chief priests and scribes were looking for some sly, treacherous way to arrest Him and put Him to death, and that the woman anointed Jesus, and that Judas Iscariot decided to betray Him.

A larger meaning . . .

Now when you put it in this context, doesn't the story of the anointing take on a much larger meaning?

You see, it was actually a symbolic enactment of all that Jesus had said was going to take place. Remember that Jesus had told His disciples *three times* in this Gospel that He'd go to Jerusalem and be rejected by the religious leaders who would condemn Him to death and deliver Him over to the Gentiles who would scourge Him and mock Him and kill Him. But that after three days, He would rise again. And still His disciples didn't get it—not after the first time, nor the second, nor even the third!

But now it was being *acted out* before their very eyes! In this woman's extravagant expression of love, she was anointing Jesus' body for burial *before* He died!

Maybe she didn't even realize it; but Jesus was interpreting it that way for His disciples. Maybe she just wanted to do something extravagant to show Jesus how much she loved Him. Maybe her intention was to anoint him to show that He is the Messiah, the Anointed One.

Or maybe she *did* see it as Jesus interpreted it. Maybe she *did* understand what the disciples hadn't yet gotten, and she was demonstrating her love for Jesus by giving Him His anointing that would ordinarily have been given after His death *now*.

Maybe she even made the connection that Jesus' followers would soon understand Isaiah 53 to make—that Jesus' Messiahship could only be truly fulfilled in His suffering, death, and resurrection!

Maybe this is getting closer to what Mark conveys by telling this story the way he does. He's saying to us that in the midst of the treacherous plans of the chief priests and scribes and Judas' treacherous betrayal of Jesus, there is God's beautiful accomplishment of His redemptive purpose in His Son. *God accomplishes His beautiful redemptive purpose amid human treachery, sometimes even through human treachery!*²

It's what Paul meant when he expressed his confidence that we know that God is working *all* things together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His eternal purpose (Romans 8:28).

A year after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York and the Pentagon in 2001, Chris Armstrong, who at that time was the editor of the journal *Christian History*, reflected on that awful event in an article in that publication's newsletter. He wrote that J. R. R. Tolkien, whom we know best as the author of *The Hobbit* and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, made it clear in his private writings that he intended to proclaim a Christian message through his works of fiction..

Armstrong reminds us that though Tolkien lived through two world wars, he held onto his faith that the catastrophes Satan intends for evil, God turns to good. He embedded this faith in the creation of his famous mythical world that he called Middle Earth.³

God's perfect plan . . .

But it doesn't work that way only in Tolkien's fictional Middle Earth. Time after time in Scripture, God overrules human evil, weaving it into His perfect plan, using it to accomplish His redemptive will.

We see it in Joseph. Second then only to Pharaoh in Egypt, when he revealed himself to his brothers who had sold him into slavery in Egypt, he assured them that God had sent him to Egypt to preserve many lives through his preparations for the famine. After their father Jacob died, his brothers thought Joseph would exact his revenge on them, and begged his forgiveness. Joseph's reply put it in perspective as he told them: **“ . . . you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good”** (Genesis 50:20).

We see it in Isaiah 53, as the Suffering Servant of the LORD suffers at the hands of the nations. **Yet**, the prophet declares, **it pleased the LORD to bruise him; He has put Him to grief** (Isaiah 53:10a), so that He might bear the sin of many and make intercession for the transgressors.

This all came to pass at the cross. There, as all evil unleashed itself against the Son of God, nailing Him to a cruel cross like a common criminal, God wrought His righteous redemption. As Peter preached to the multitudes on that first day of Pentecost following Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, he declared:

“ . . . Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; whom God raised up” (Acts 2:23-24a)

The chief priests and scribes plotting against Jesus.

The woman anointing Jesus.

Judas betraying Jesus.

Jesus going through the mockery of a trial before the Sanhedrin and accused before Pilate on trumped up charges of sedition against Rome.

Jesus being condemned to death on the cross for the sake of political expediency.

Jesus nailed to the cross, suspended between heaven and earth, dying for us and our sins.

And in the midst of it all, God working to accomplish His redemptive purpose in His Son, Jesus Christ, working to save us from our sins.

Beauty amid treachery? Indeed! And thanks be to God! Amen.

†MEG

¹ Scripture taken from the New King James Version.

² These commentaries were helpful in my interpretation of this text: James A. Brooks, “Mark,” in *The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture, Vol. 23* (Nashville: Broadman, 1991); Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Second Gospel* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2000); and Henry E. Turlington, “Mark,” in *The Broadman Bible Commentary, Vol. 8* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969).

³ Chris Armstrong, editor of Christian History, “9/11, History, and the True Story,” *Christian History* newsletter (9-13-02).