

**Parts of the Saving Passion:
Preparation**

Isaiah 43:16-23; John 12:1-8

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Scholars have long noted that the Gospel of John is different from the other three gospels. While Matthew, Mark, and Luke were content to simply tell the story of Jesus, John tells the story and gives subtle theological lessons. John has been called “double plotted,” meaning that his writing style often has two meanings (Thomas Long, *Christian Century*, March 14, 2001, p. 11). Ordinary events and seemingly mundane actions often have a deeper spiritual meaning in John. The wine is in the water, the light is in the darkness, and the Word is in the flesh.

We see this double-plottedness in the theologically rich episode that unfolds in chapter twelve. It has only five characters. Martha is present. She prepares and serves a meal. Martha’s brother Lazarus, who was just raised from dead, is present. He is at the dinner table. Mary, Martha and Lazarus’ sister, is present, and notice what she does. She anoints Jesus’ feet with expensive ointment and then wipes his feet with her hair. The disciple named Judas, the one who betrayed Jesus, is present also, and he objects to Mary’s extravagant actions. And then Jesus is the fifth and final character. He rebukes Judas and defends Mary.

In this theologically symbolic story, Mary is the main character. Even though Jesus is present, her actions drive the story. John tells us that Jesus came to the house of Lazarus in the village of Bethany, about a mile and a half east of Jerusalem. Today Bethany is located in the controversial West Bank. When I visited Israel a number of years ago, we were advised not to visit that area. Too dangerous, they said, so we did not. According to John, Jesus and his friends gathered at the home of Lazarus for a dinner party. Here is an example of the double-plottedness in this story. John notes that it was six days before Passover. Why did he include that seemingly unimportant bit of

information? Passover, we know, was on Friday. Count back six days from Friday. What day of the week then was the dinner in Bethany? It was Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath. Sabbath is from sundown on Friday until sundown on Saturday. Without us even realizing it, John has just told us that this dinner party was on the Jewish day of worship.

So what did Mary do that made her the main character in this story? She carried out the ultimate act of Sabbath worship. She took a pound of costly perfume “made from pure nard,” the text says, and anointed Jesus’ feet. Then she lovingly wiped his feet with her hair. This is a double-plotted action. The anointing with pure nard normally would have been done at one’s burial, to cover the stench of decomposition. This was an act of worship that prepared Jesus for what was soon to come.

In an act of worship on the Jewish Sabbath, Mary prepares Jesus for the end.

Now enters Judas Iscariot. If Mary is the model of faithful, loving discipleship, Judas is just the opposite. John is careful to note, as if he had to, that Judas is the one who betrayed Jesus. After Mary anoints Jesus’ feet, Judas steps forward to complain about Mary’s extravagant action. It was a waste, he believed. Why, that perfume was worth nearly a year’s salary for a laborer. Judas argues that it could have been sold and the proceeds used to aid the poor. How noble of him, right? To be so concerned for the poor. But then John writes this in parentheses:

He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.

John ends this theologically rich episode with Jesus coming to Mary’s defense:

Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.

A part of the saving passion is preparation. In a beautiful, loving act of worship, Mary prepared Jesus for his death and burial. The next day, John says, the people waved palm branches and shouted, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!" But not on this day. This was the Sabbath, a day of worship, a day of preparation for what was to come. As our Lenten season winds to a close, in the context of our worship, I ask you, Are you prepared? Are you prepared to be as devoted to Jesus as Mary was?

A Prayer of Confession is printed in your worship guide. Before we come to the Lord's Table, let us confess our sins together.

Prayer of Confession

Gracious God, our sins are too heavy to carry, too real to hide, and too deep to undo. Forgive what our lips tremble to name, what our hearts can no longer bear, and what has become for us a consuming fire of judgment. Set us free from a past that we cannot change; open to us a future in which we can be changed; and grant us grace to grow more and more in your likeness and image, through Jesus Christ, the light of the world. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

Brothers and sisters, hear this word of the Lord and rest in this truth: "For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us. (Psalm 103:11-12).