

Series: The Cross

March 5, 2017

Title: Bethany

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Text: Mark 14:1-11

Passover A.D. 33

Passover A.D. 33:

Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem on a Sunday. The date, as near as we can figure it, was March 29, A.D. 33.

Jesus' entrance was timed to coincide with the arrival of tens of thousands of pilgrims who had traveled from near and far to celebrate the Passover festival.

Passover: Independence Day, freedom from slavery, victory over evil oppressors. And it all happened on one night, without a single person lifting a hand or a weapon.

Passover: Every single pilgrim who trudged up the final hillside for that first glimpse of Jerusalem carried a dream that one day it would happen again. God would at last raise up a new King who would defeat Israel's oppressors once and for all.

And when that happened, what better time than Passover!

A King's entrance:

Jesus chose to ride a young donkey that day. His choice sent a powerful message to those thousands of pilgrims with their deep dreams of freedom.

Riding a little donkey through the city gates may not have looked very impressive to the Roman soldiers standing on the city walls, but the thousands of Jewish people present that day saw something very different: the arrival of the King. Wasn't this precisely what the prophet Zechariah had written?

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Zechariah 9:9 NIV

"Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!

Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!

See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

No wonder, then, that they hailed him with a royal welcome:

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Mark 11:9-10 NIV

"Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

The message became even clearer the next day, when Jesus went into the Temple and chased out the moneychangers. The great kings of the past had begun their reigns with a massive cleanup operation in the Temple. Every trace of impurity and paganism had to go. The structure was swept clean from one end to the other. Only then could God be present with His people.

Wasn't this prophet from Galilee doing the same thing?

Passover A.D. 33:

But there was one group of people in Jerusalem that wanted nothing to do with a new messiah-king. Mark writes:

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Mark 14:1-2 NIV

Now the Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread were only two days away, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were scheming to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him.

"But not during the festival," they said, "or the people may riot."

Rome ruled a vast empire. And the way Rome ruled was through proxies – local officials who could hopefully control the populace. If they didn't or couldn't, then Rome would send in its mighty legions. End of story.

No wonder, then, that the ruling elite were so fearful of a riot right in the middle of the Passover celebration. They knew what they had to do. They just hadn't figured out the *how* or the *when*.

Questions

A secret anointing?

Two days before the celebration of Passover a man named Simon invited Jesus and his disciples over for dinner. In the middle of the meal something strange happened:

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Mark 14:3 NIV

While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of Simon the leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head.

What was she doing? What did this extravagant gift of perfume mean? Could it be that she was anointing Jesus as King, just as Israel's kings had been anointed in the past?

After all, King David himself had been anointed by Samuel in Bethlehem, far from the suspicious gaze of the rejected King Saul. Samuel had come to David's family on the pretext of offering a sacrifice. Only when he was alone with them did his true intention come out: he was there to anoint the next king of Israel.

Now, this unnamed woman was doing the same thing. The King who had ridden into the city on a donkey and who had driven the merchants from the Temple was now Israel's anointed King: Messiah – the Anointed One.

Just a waste of money?

Or was He? Not everyone at the table got the memo. Some of those present lit into the woman for wasting such a precious commodity. Passover was a time for giving to the poor. Wouldn't this perfume, worth a year's wages, have been better given to provide for them?

No doubt the disciples were among those who quantified the gift in dollars and cents, as it were. They had done the same thing when Jesus had told

them to feed the 5000 on the hillside in Galilee. The job was impossible, they told Him. It would have cost 2/3 of a year's salary.

A king or not a king? And if a king, what kind of a king would He be?

Funeral expenses:

At this point, Jesus stepped into the conversation. His words carried an ominous message:

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Mark 14:6-9 NIV

"Leave her alone," said Jesus. "Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me.

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"She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial.

"Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."

This was not a time for quibbling over the ministry budget. This was not a time for business as usual. In just a few short days Jesus would be gone and they would be burying Him in the ground.

The woman may have anointed Jesus to be Messiah King, but He was going to be a Messiah who would die for the sins of His subjects.

Mark began the story of Jesus with the words:

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Mark 1:1 NIV [amended]

The beginning of the gospel about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God,

Now Jesus makes it clear that this "gospel," this good news which will be preached throughout the world, is the good news of the King who died.

Bethany

Judas Iscariot:

At least one of the disciples understood the hidden meaning in Jesus' riddle about the perfume. His name was Judas. Judas was a pragmatist: he could now see the writing on the wall. Whatever hopes he had had for Jesus as Israel's Messiah, it was now clear that *this king* wasn't going to put up a fight. *This king* wasn't going to win any battles against the Romans. *This king* wasn't going to call down fire from heaven.

This king was a loser. And Judas was determined to get out while the getting was good. Mark says:

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Mark 14:10-11 NIV

Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them. They were delighted to hear this and promised to give him money. So he watched for an opportunity to hand him over.

The ruling elite had their *how*. Now it was just a matter of *when*.

The test:

The dinner party in Bethany casts a long dark shadow that reaches all the way to a rocky outcropping outside the city walls of Jerusalem. An unnamed woman's gift of perfume becomes the first of the funeral rites for Israel's King.

Little did she know it, but the woman's gift created a test for everyone who was in the room that evening. She anointed a King – the King. But how would His subjects respond?

- Would the disciples continue to pursue their own fantasies of an earthly kingdom?
- Would they, like Judas, abandon ship and betray Jesus to His enemies?
- Or would they choose to recognize that Jesus came as King to defeat a far greater foe?

Each one of them made a choice that evening, and their choice determined the roles they would play when the long dark shadow in Bethany became the dead of night.

Messiah!

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Jesus gave His disciples one command: "Come, follow me!" Everything else that happens in life is a test of whether we will do just that.

Like the disciples, we live in a world that is messy and confusing, a world that desperately needs a King. Like them, we long for a King who will fix everything and make things right. We may be willing to give Jesus a try. But we think we know where we're supposed to be going.

In answer, Jesus gives us that one command: "Come, follow me!"

So how will we respond when He makes the Cross His throne? What will we do when He makes a tomb His bedchamber? What will we do when He walks not away from, but right into the darkest and most broken places in our lives?

Will we follow?

LIFE Group Lesson for "Bethany"

What's in a name?

- How did you get your name? Who picked it? What was their reason for naming you the way they did?

A secret anointing

- Israel had a long tradition of designating a new king by anointing him with oil. This was done by a priest, signifying God's approval of the person to be king over God's people.
 - The word "Messiah" means "Anointed One."
 - Thus, the Messiah is the king chosen by God.
 - David refers to himself as God's "anointed one" numerous times in the Psalms.
- So how did David come to be king, when there was already another king whose son should have succeeded him?
 - God rejected King Saul because he disobeyed God's direct command.
 - As a result, God sent the prophet Samuel to anoint a new king.
 - *Samuel 16:1-3 NIV*
 - *The LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king."*
- But it was extremely dangerous for Samuel to anoint a new king while Saul was still on the throne!
 - *1 Samuel 16:2a NIV*
 - *But Samuel said, "How can I go? If Saul hears about it, he will kill me."*
- That's why God told Samuel to conduct a secret anointing of the new king:
 - *1 Samuel 16:2b-3 NIV*
 - *The LORD said, "Take a heifer with you and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.' Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what to do. You are to anoint for me the one I indicate."*
- The story concludes with Samuel anointing David, the youngest of Jesse's sons.

A second secret anointing:

- The story of David's secret anointing helps us understand what was going on when a woman poured perfume over Jesus' head at a banquet in Bethany just before Passover.
 - Remember: Jesus had indicated that He was coming as the long-awaited King.
 - He had ridden into Jerusalem on a young donkey, fulfilling Zechariah's prophecy that the king would come in just that way.
 - He had demonstrated His kingly authority by cleaning up the Temple, chasing out the merchants and moneychangers.
 - Now a woman came and poured perfume on His head, thus secretly anointing Him as Messiah, the King.
- So why is she anonymous in Mark's version of the story?
 - The reason Mark doesn't give her name very likely has to do with the fact that her action would have been seen as subversive and worthy of arrest or even death.
 - Notice how Judas, who was present when she anointed Jesus, immediately went to the authorities to offer to betray Him. Could he have told them that Jesus had been secretly anointed?
 - Mark wrote his gospel during the time when the same people who had crucified Jesus were still in power. For that reason, he provides "protective anonymity" for this woman and others in the story of Jesus arrest and crucifixion. To have put their names in writing could well have led to their own death in the years immediately after Jesus' death and resurrection.

What kind of king?

- The reactions of the people present that day say a lot about what kind of king they were looking for and how they saw Jesus:
 - The woman saw Him as Messiah, a new David to be secretly anointed.
 - Some of the people present (no doubt including at least some of the disciples) merely interpreted the event in terms of dollars and cents. They saw no special meaning in her action. They saw no new Messiah that day.
 - When Jesus reinterpreted the woman's anointing of Him as a preparation for His burial, Judas decided to jump ship. He wasn't

going to be part of a doomed movement. He traded his soul for a few shekels.

“Follow me!”

- The anointing of Jesus in Bethany is the opening scene in the final act of Mark’s gospel.
 - It is as if Mark begins telling the story of the Cross by beginning with the funeral! At least that’s the way Jesus would have it.
- So what was Jesus trying to tell His followers?
 - Was He giving them a riddle to figure out: kingly anointing = funeral?
 - King David had been secretly anointed king, had lived in hiding for 10 years, but had ultimately risen to power as Israel’s greatest ruler.
 - Jesus was letting His followers and friends know that it wouldn’t be like that for Him. He might be secretly anointed, but He would die a very public death.
- And that creates a test of each of them and each one of us:
 - Do we want that kind of King, that kind of Messiah?
 - Are we willing to follow that King into the darkness and brokenness of the world?
 - Are we willing to go to war against all the forces of evil by His side?
- Jesus said:
 - *Mark 8:34 NIV*
 - *“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”*
- What would that look like in your life?

Prayer time:

- Be sure to take some time to pray for each other’s needs and give thanks for ways that the Lord has answered prayers.