

**Message: Loving Jesus**

**What gets you up to come to church?**

There are a lot of good reasons to come. We see some of our closest friends again. We get the chance to share what’s going on in our lives in a safe place with people we trust. We enjoy our time of worship - singing, prayers and more. We reconnect to God and to the community of those who believe as we do. We’re able to refocus.

**We’re reminded of God’s love over and over again.** It’s the best place to do so. And that soothes and calms whatever the storm or fire is raging inside of us. We’re able, at least for a few moments, to let go of what’s troubling us, turning our cares over to God. We know that things are right with God. All will be well.

**What happens during the other six days of the week or before and after the service?** That’s when our faith gets real. During those other days and times we often aren’t in a safe place. There may be little spiritual life in the places we go to. The “me, first” attitudes and behaviors of those we work and live with amplify small things and make bigger problems seem overwhelming.

**If we’re honest with ourselves, we contribute to the mess.** We don’t usually think about God in the middle of the storm. We prefer to be in control, to have everything exactly the way we want it. Call on God and give control of our lives to Jesus? No way! Why would we ever do that? It’s my life. I choose how I want to live. And so we find ourselves tossed and turned by the trials of a life without a true focus. We may pray to God but feel like we aren’t getting answers we want, when the problem is we may not be listening.

**Our passage for today, John 12:1-8, offers clarity and hope.** It shows us an example of what focusing on God means. Holding on to Jesus is the way to live life fully, no matter what may happen. Last week, we looked at a few questions about a passage. Examining the answers led us to some revealing conclusions. Let’s use that approach today as well.

**First, we need to set up the scene.** Jesus and the disciples are again visiting his best friends – Lazarus, Martha and Mary. The last time

Jesus visited there was a problem: Lazarus had died. It was dangerous for Jesus to visit this close to Jerusalem. A lot of questions were asked.

**It’s a difficult time.** Tensions between the Pharisees, the Temple authorities and Jesus are very high. In fact, Thomas made the statement *“Come along. We might as well die with him”* - not a great party invitation (John 11:16, MSG)! Jesus and the disciples have withdrawn from public ministry with Jewish leaders. They’re staying in Ephraim, near the wilderness (v54).

**But there’s a buzz in the air.** It’s six days later, almost time for Passover. Everyone is wondering if Jesus will make an appearance. After all the High Priest, Caiaphas said, *“Don’t you know anything? Can’t you see that it’s to our advantage that one man dies for the people rather than the whole nation be destroyed?”* (vv49-50).

**The aroma of death is in the air.** Lazarus stank after four days in the tomb. The judgments of the religious leaders stink with death of evil and corruption.

**That leads to the first question: what is nard?** Most scholars agree that it’s the plant known as spikenard or Jatamansi today. It’s a flowering plant that grows in the Himalayas of Nepal, China and India. There are twelve different species. Most commonly, the plant grows to about 3’ in height with pink or white flowers. The stems can be crushed and distilled, creating a thick, aromatic, amber-colored oil.

**Nard oil is deeply intense with a musky, rooty smell.** Nard oil is used as a perfume or incense. It’s also a mild sedative and an herbal medicine that helps reduce inflammation and swelling. Nard has been used for thousands of years in spiritual practices and repels bugs. Mary’s gift was spiritual and practical, helping Jesus to relax.

**John 12:3 stands out: *“The house was filled with the aroma.”***

Sometimes, we feel a response deeper than words. Beyond language, there’s a place where our soul connects with God and creation. Our senses are part of that connection. As an example, many of our memories are associated with aromas.

Here are a few I remember:

- ...a winter day with the smell of a roast or sauce cooking
- ...a walk through a pine forest on a rainy day
- ...the smell of my mother’s favorite perfume, Chanel No. 5
- ...the scent of lilies at a funeral.

What aroma and memory comes to your mind?

**Mary creates a memory that goes beyond words.** It connects our senses, mind and spirit. Our soul remembers that moment in time. These moments stay with us. This leads us to a second question.

### **Why is Mary anointing Jesus’ feet?**

The answer lies in Jesus’ last visit with the family. (Turn to John 11:1 to read it.) John gives us the obvious clue, “*This is the Mary who anointed the Lord with fragrant oil and wiped his feet with her hair. Her brother Lazarus was ill*” (v2). Mary and Martha were very concerned.

The sisters sent word to Jesus, “*Master, the one you love so very much is sick.*” (v3)

Jesus says something mysterious, “*This sickness isn’t fatal. It’ll become an occasion to show God’s glory by glorifying God’s Son.*” Now Jesus loved Martha, Mary and Lazarus, but he stayed where he was for two more days (vv4-5, MSG). And Lazarus died.

**It’s easy to imagine how Mary and Martha felt: betrayed, suffering, angry and sad.** They knew Jesus had the power to heal. Their friends knew Jesus could heal (v37). They didn’t know why he didn’t come when they called for him. Instead, they watched Lazarus suffer and die.

### **Where was God?**

**It’s the same for us today.** We pray for our loved ones to heal, suffering to be eased, a miraculous change in a person’s life. All too often, we don’t see a change for the better. We watch our loved ones and people that we care about suffer. Some die. The same things happen to us. We’re afraid. We smell fear and death.

### **We wonder: where is God?**

**Jesus knows!** He knows what we want in the same way Jesus knew Lazarus was going to die. We all die when it’s our time. The world is filled with suffering and death. That’s the way it has become.

**God could have walked away and left humanity and the world to us.** After all, we’re the ones who have corrupted and polluted that which was made to be good. But God didn’t do that. God loves us very much. Jesus was there. He wept, showing that God knows our sadness. So God acted. God sent Jesus to redeem and restore us and to heal creation. Only one thing is required: we have to believe.

**Jesus told the disciples,** *“Lazarus died. And I am glad for your sakes that I wasn’t there. You’re about to be given new grounds for believing. Now let’s go to him”* (vv14-15, MSG). That may sound harsh but it’s realistic. The world isn’t a place for fantasy. God isn’t Santa Claus. Bad things happen to good people.

**Martha heard Jesus was coming and she went out to greet him** (11:20-27). She said, *“Master, if you’d been here, my brother wouldn’t have died. Even now, I know that whatever you ask God he will give you.”*

Jesus said, *“Your brother will be raised up.”*

Martha replied, *“I know that he will be raised up in the resurrection at the end of time.”*

That’s when Jesus said something amazing, *“You don’t have to wait for the End. I am, right now, Resurrection and Life. The one who believes in me, even though he or she dies, will live. And everyone who lives believing in me does not ultimately die at all. Do you believe this?”*

Martha said, *“Yes, Master. All along I have believed that you are the Messiah, the Son of God who comes into the world.”*

**What an amazing revelation and response!** Martha, the one who always seemed to busy, is the second person to say who Jesus is. She and Peter have been touched by God’s Spirit.

**Martha goes in the house to get Mary.** Mary jumps up, runs to Jesus and falls at his feet, sobbing. Jesus asks where the tomb is and begins to

weep. Then he says something odd, “*Remove the stone.*” (v39) Martha says there’ll be a stench, but Jesus looks her in the eye and says, “*Didn’t I tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?*” (v40).

Jesus raises his eyes to heaven and prays, “*Father, I’m grateful that you have listened to me. I know you always do listen, but on account of this crowd standing here I’ve spoken so that they might believe that you sent me.*”

Then he shouts, “*Lazarus, come out!*” And Lazarus came out, a cadaver, wrapped from head to toe, and with a kerchief over his face.

Jesus told them, “*Unwrap him and let him loose.*” (vv41-44).

**What amazing grace!** Jesus gave a gift like no other so that they might know who he is and the authority he has. Like Lazarus, Jesus set us from whatever binds us and gives us new life.

**Jesus demonstrated who he was – the Messiah, God-with-us, in a powerful way.** Many believed that day and praised God. And many more have believed since then, as they read or listened to this passage. Jesus came to save us, to give us a new life, not just in a distant, far-off time, but here and now. Some of the people then didn’t get it. They told the Pharisees what happened, raising tensions and division further. Some people don’t get it today. They prefer to hold on to traditions and rules, rather than embracing a God of love and relationship. And so we find division and tension.

**Mary “got it.”**

**How did Mary express her appreciation and great love for Jesus?** She cared for someone she loved. She treated Jesus as the finest earthly king by anointing him with the best perfume, something that gave her pleasure and reminded her of good things and good times. Mary soothed his feet with perfumed oil, assuming the role of the lowest servant, even drying his feet with her hair. She took the position of the least of those present to serve the one who was the greatest. By doing so, Mary showed by her attitude and actions that she knew what being a disciple really meant. In her suffering and pain, she believed and gave control to

God. And God cared for her, as God cares for all of us. Mary was authentic in her faith.

**The other disciples didn’t get it.** They smelled fear and the aroma of death. Judas was most belligerent about it. But Mary was quiet, calm and confident. She didn’t care about the cost or what others said or thought. She demonstrated her faith first and foremost of all the disciples during Jesus’ last days on Earth and at the tomb.

**Mary’s focus was on Jesus. What’s your focus?**

Suffering is the number one reason why people struggle to believe in God. Suffering is also the number one reason most people say they have come to believe or grow spiritually in faith.

**Jesus knows our suffering, shame and guilt.** We don’t have to feel guilt and shame. We don’t worship a God of guilt and shame. We worship a God of love, grace and peace. Mary shows us the way. Let’s come to God with our joys and sorrows and give our best, most precious thing (ourselves) to Jesus with thanks for all he has done, and will do, for us. Mary shows us that we are all jars, waiting to be poured out before the Lord of grace and love.

**Believe in Jesus, trust God and smell the aroma of new life.**

Let us pray ...

*Holy God. You have called us to be holy as you are holy, to be perfect as you are perfect. In humility we ask, in faith we trust, in hope we wait, that you are extending love throughout our character and relationships.*

*May we look for ways to be obedient to your will this week.*

*In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.*

**Isaiah 43:(16-17) 18-21 (CEB)**

Don’t remember the prior things;  
don’t ponder ancient history.  
Look! I’m doing a new thing;  
now it sprouts up; don’t you recognize it?  
I’m making a way in the desert,  
paths in the wilderness.  
The beasts of the field,  
the jackals and ostriches, will honor me,  
because I have put water in the desert  
and streams in the wilderness  
to give water to my people,  
my chosen ones,  
this people whom I formed for myself,  
who will recount my praise.

**John 12:1-8 (CEB)**

Six days before Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, home of Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Lazarus and his sisters hosted a dinner for him. Martha served and Lazarus was among those who joined him at the table. Then Mary took an extraordinary amount, almost three-quarters of a pound, of very expensive perfume made of pure nard. She anointed Jesus’ feet with it, then wiped his feet dry with her hair. The house was filled with the aroma of the perfume. Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), complained, “This perfume was worth a year’s wages! Why wasn’t it sold and the money given to the poor?” (He said this not because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief. He carried the money bag and would take what was in it.)

Then Jesus said, “Leave her alone. This perfume was to be used in preparation for my burial, and this is how she has used it. You will always have the poor among you, but you won’t always have me.”