



ELIZABETHTOWN  
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

*Fifth Sunday of Lent*  
*Expect the Unexpected*

John 12.1–8

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## JOHN 12.1–8—MARY ANOINTING JESUS' FEET WITH OIL

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*Six days before Passover, Jesus entered Bethany where Lazarus, so recently raised from the dead, was living. Lazarus and his sisters invited Jesus to dinner at their home. Martha served. Lazarus was one of those sitting at the table with them. Mary came in with a jar of very expensive aromatic oils, anointed and massaged Jesus' feet, and then wiped them with her hair. The fragrance of the oils filled the house.*

*Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples, even then getting ready to betray him, said, "Why wasn't this oil sold and the money given to the poor? It would have easily brought three hundred silver pieces." He said this not because he cared two cents about the poor but because he was a thief. He was in charge of their common funds, but also embezzled them.*

*Jesus said, "Let her alone. She's anticipating and honoring the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you. You don't always have me."*

This story of Mary lavishly anointing Jesus' feet with a fragrant oil offers us a dramatic and vivid introduction to the passion story. It is about to unfold as we, too, turn our faces to Jerusalem and the events that await Jesus, and us. This account of Jesus' anointing, is found in all four Gospels: here in John and similar versions in Matthew and Mark. And in Luke 7 there is a slight variation as an unnamed woman bathed Jesus' feet with her tears.

This story of Jesus' anointing is a preacher's wonderland. There are so many hooks with which to engage us, so many trails to explore.

- We could do a character study of this scene—there are the siblings: Lazarus, who Jesus had just raised from the dead and who was now trying to figure how to live the rest of his resurrection life. There was Martha the server and her sister Mary, the anointer, and of course there was Judas, the betrayer. What

2 an interesting study it would be to look at the strengths and weaknesses of each and perhaps in the process, find ourselves.

- We could look at the possibilities of Jesus' anointing foreshadowing his death and burial, as his body would be anointed again when he is laid in the tomb. And what, we might explore, unfolded during the days between anointings?
- We could analyze Jesus' rebuttal, "the poor will always be with you." How does that jive with the Jesus we know in scripture who champions the cause of the poor? Except in John. This is the only mention in John about helping the poor, where no references are made to Jesus' pity or compassion. A different understanding of Jesus, perhaps than that of Luke.
- We could talk about extravagant love and the actions of a true disciple. Mary's act of love is the picture of the fullness of a life of discipleship. She shows what it means to be one of Jesus' own. She gives boldly of herself in love to Jesus.
- We could talk about the temptation that Judas was unable to resist, as he became first a thief and then a traitor for the sake of money.
- Or...we could consider again the importance of never putting off what we should say or do...life is an uncertain thing and tomorrow might be too late.

Any one of these approaches, and countless more, would be both fascinating and instructive. What I've been marveling at this Lent, though, as I studied this scripture in John, what has really struck me, is how most of the actions of this scene were totally and completely unexpected.

- It was unexpected that Jesus would dampen the mood of the feast and super-extravagant gift by

talking about his death. After all, this was a celebration meal for a second lease on life that Lazarus had just experienced, who after being called back from the dead by Jesus, was sitting right there, enjoying good food and time with loved ones. And undoubtedly Jesus was an honored guest here as well—it was a celebration.

- It was unexpected that Jesus would engage in what amounted to an argument over dinner with one of his friends, when he rebuked Judas. Talk about awkward dinner conversation.
- Perhaps even most surprising is that Jesus was anointed by Mary, a woman. It would have been an unparalleled practice! Men did the anointing, such as when Samuel anointed Saul to become Israel's first king. Here, Mary anointed Jesus, then let down her hair—and wiped his feet with it. We can only begin to imagine the cultural connotations of that act. Israelite women did not unbind their hair in public, and often not even at home. And anointing the head would have been a common practice, but anointing the feet, especially by a woman, would also have been unprecedented. It was all very scandalous.
- And another unexpected thing—the whole scene was very sensuous...the smells would have overloaded the senses.
  - There was possibly the stench of death lingering, after Lazarus came out of the tomb.
  - There was the smell of a celebration meal, carefully prepared for a brother who was alive!
  - There may have been the smell of good wine.
  - The smell of the hot sun on a well's stone walls.
  - The smell of bread, fresh from the oven.

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- The smell of mud spread on the eyes of a man born blind.
- The smell of a man's pallet on which he'd had to lie for 38 years.
- The smell of a green pasture, wet with dew at the break of dawn, perfect grazing for a hungry herd.
- The smell of hope, that in the end, love wins.

And what about the oil? It was certainly unexpected that someone would use such an unusual amount of perfume—thought to have been spikenard—to clean someone's feet. A pound—costing nearly one year's wages—would have completely overwhelmed the house. That's like an essential oil worth tens of thousands of dollars that permeates every nook and cranny and corner. And interestingly, the scent of spikenard is known to attract cats. Given the excessive amount used by Mary, we are left to wonder what other unexpected neighborhood visitors might have wafted into the party that evening!

We don't know all the details—we have much to speculate. But we do know that with God, we can expect the unexpected. God is often up to unexpected things with, for and through unexpected people.

- People thought that the Messiah might resemble King David; what they got instead was a carpenter and itinerant preacher—unexpected!
- The crowds who welcomed Jesus, just a few verses later, expected Jesus to throw out the Romans; instead he was executed by them. Unexpected!
- Even his disciples expected his crucifixion to be the end of the story; but it was just the beginning! Unexpected!

And this isn't the half of it. As recorded elsewhere, in the Hebrew scriptures,

- Sarah wasn't expected to have children, let alone found a dynasty! She laughed! And at age of 90 she had a bouncing baby boy. Unexpected!
- Moses wasn't expected to lead the Israelites to freedom. In spite of his impediments, he delivered. Unexpected!
- Miriam wasn't expected to be the prophetess of Israel teaching her people to sing of God's victory over the Egyptians, yet she did. Unexpected!
- The ruddy-faced shepherd boy David was never expected to become king. And yet we know...he did. Unexpected!

And the list goes on...

Lent and the celebration of Easter are the highlight of the work and activity of this unexpected God, as death was assumed to have the last word...until Jesus. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Let's sit with this story of the unexpected.

Because we, too, have encountered the unexpected. Some of us may remember just a little more than a year ago, on that early Sunday Christmas morning, when each person present in worship got a \$20 bill to regift in whatever way they felt called. Certainly unexpected! But the real surprise for all of us were the ways that these gifts touched lives far and wide. A card was included with each \$20 bill given, and the cards were completed and returned and displayed on the bulletin board just outside these doors, sharing the ways that the money had been used. Some folks pooled their money to have a greater impact, some added to it themselves, kind of creating matching funds. One person did just that and gave it to someone to help cover transportation costs involved in extensive medical treatments. Another's funds were doubled as they donated to a nature conservancy to help to protect our natural world against climate change. Many gave to a wide variety of organizations, such as COBYS, On Earth Peace and

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New Community Project. Some gave to individuals in need, folks going through tough times.

74 gifts were given locally, 13 were given across the nation and 12 were given internationally, reaching as far away as Puerto Rico, Honduras, Senegal, Germany and Nigeria. Talk about a God up to the unexpected through the unexpected!

Little did we expect some five years ago, that Boko Haram would murder and ravage the northeast of Nigeria, leaving thousands in our sister church murdered and countless, homeless and hungry. When we had the opportunity to respond, the unexpected happened as we dug deep into our pockets and hearts. In a few months' time, we collected and sent over \$150 thousand dollars in relief support to the Nigeria Crisis Fund—becoming the top-giving congregation, denominationally. It led to a team of ten from this congregation who traveled to Nigeria to encourage and learn and love. And not much more than several months later, we dug deep again to help defray much of the cost of two tractors for Nigeria—about \$38K in three weeks. Ours is a God of the unexpected!

I've been thinking this week as I arrive for work in this building, as I sit at my desk and

- hear the pitter patter of little and sometimes not so little feet above,
- as I hear chairs being scootched across the floor,
- as I hear the voices of children in song down the hall, "pickin' up pawpaws, put 'em in your pocket"
- as I smell the delicious scents of hot breakfasts and lunches prepared in the kitchen downstairs for growing bodies—

I wonder if our forebears, who planned and built this building some sixty years ago, some of whom even are sitting here this morning, could have predicted the hundreds and hundreds of children over the years who have been nurtured and received



care here all week long in the form of daycare and nursery school. Ours is a God of the unexpected!

And I wonder, as we think ahead and dream about renovations and expansions, what will God be up to? Because we know that, with God, we can expect the unexpected! Through the unexpected. And we wonder...how can we best be open to embrace the unexpected and to join God in whatever venture lies ahead on our journey?

I invite you...take a look around you. Look at the people sitting near you—to your right, to your left. Who will God work through next? Our God of the unexpected may be about to use each of us in a surprising way...to provide care for a friend, to listen with ears and heart, to do difficult work with faithfulness and courage, to stand up for those who are less fortunate, to resist peer pressure at school and offer a reconciling alternative to those who are watching, to lend our resources when they are most needed, to fill a disaster relief bucket or two... or three ... or 280. Who knows?

What we do know is that God is regularly about the business of surprising us with where God shows up, whom God uses, and what God accomplishes. We, like Mary and Martha, Judas and Lazarus, and all of those who have come before us, can expect the unexpected. Thanks be to God!





