

Fifth Sunday in Lent

John 12:1-8

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church April 6, 2025

In a commentary on our Gospel lesson for this morning, a story is told about a group of pastors who met in preparation for their Sunday sermon on this text, and got into a spirited discussion about Mary's anointing of Jesus. As you might imagine, the discussion raised some questions about the extreme nature of Mary's actions, including the cost of the perfumed oil she used – worth 300 denarii – which in those days would have been equal to almost a year's wages for a laborer...

And then there's the rather unsettling image of her wiping Jesus' feet with her hair; which would have been strange enough in and of itself. But made all the more extreme when you realize that in those days women kept their hair covered in the presence of all men except their husbands.

On a number of levels, what Mary did at the dinner table that evening was irrational, wasteful and reckless, as well as being disrespectful of the cultural and religious norms of the day.

As the story in the commentary goes, toward the end of the pastors' study group on this passage, one of the pastors, who had been quiet throughout the conversation, took his wallet from his pocket, reached in and pulled out a \$100.00 bill. Then, as the other pastors looked on, he took a Bic lighter, and over the loud objections of his

colleagues, set the bill on fire, saying, “I burn this \$100.00 to the glory of God, thereby removing it from the possibility of our doing anything practical or useful with it.”

Actually, to make his point as powerfully as John did in his Gospel text, the pastor would have had to burn about \$40,000.00. But still, even the \$100.00 conflagration stung the sensibilities of the other pastors and brought the extreme nature of Mary’s actions home in a most memorable way...

All four Gospels tell some variation of the story of Jesus being anointed by a woman. In Matthew and Mark the woman, who is not named, pours the extravagantly expensive oil over Jesus’ head... In Luke, the event takes place at the home of a Pharisee, where a “sinful” woman enters the house uninvited, kneels at Jesus’ feet, washes his feet with her tears and wipes them with her hair. After which she pours the oil on Jesus’ feet and kisses them...

Only in John’s Gospel is the woman identified as Mary, sister of Lazarus and Martha... The same Mary who, as Luke tells the story, chose at dinner one night to sit at Jesus’ feet and listen to his teaching while her sister Martha made all the preparations for the meal; again disregarding the social and religious norms of the day, which would have reserved the seats around any rabbi or teacher for men, and insisted that the women of the household attend to the details of dinner preparation...

The same Mary who, according to John, had knelt at Jesus’ feet on the road to Bethany... this time to make a tearful accusation of sorts. Her brother Lazarus had died four days earlier, and Jesus had missed the whole tragic event. And so when finally he had arrived, Mary ran to

meet him, throwing herself at his feet and saying, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”...

So now we hear this story of Mary's extravagant, inappropriate, embarrassing action on behalf of Jesus. John tells us it was six days before the Passover. No doubt Mary knew the danger Jesus was in. Jesus' raising of her brother Lazarus a few days earlier had amazed the people and alarmed the religious authorities. Thousands of Jews would be coming to Jerusalem for Passover, and already the Roman government was in a heightened state of security. Any unrest or trouble caused by Jesus would mean trouble for the Jews. Mary knew all this. She also knew what the Roman government was capable of doing when the “Pax Romana” (the “Peace of Rome”) was threatened...

And so on the evening when Jesus came to eat with her brother Lazarus, Mary “spent the farm”... Perhaps it was Jesus' powerful teaching that led her to such an extravagant display of love... perhaps it was his raising of Lazarus... or perhaps it was Mary's recognition that the authorities would soon be attempting to silence this one she loved...

But to use a perfumed oil **worth a year's worth of wages**? And to take off her head covering, **in the presence of all those men**, to kneel at Jesus' feet, and to wipe his feet with her hair? For Mary do **with her body** what artist Jan Richardson did in the art work on the front of our bulletin, which she created in response to our Gospel text for this morning, and which she entitled, “Extravagance”... isn't it a bit much?

Look at it... This messy, earthy, crazy, extravagant thing is what Mary **did** when she anointed Jesus' feet with the perfumed oil and wiped his feet with her hair... It's hard to fathom really... the irrational

nature of such an action, or the motivation for such an extreme expression of wild, reckless love...

Doesn't it make you wonder what Mary saw in Jesus to make her do what she did? I've wondered that many times as I've encountered this text... **And the only thing I can imagine is that she saw the snow leopard... the only thing I can imagine is that she saw the snow leopard...**

Theologian and writer Belden Lane speaks of the snow leopard in his book "The Solace of Fierce Landscapes" as he tells the story of the naturalist Peter Matthiessen, who trekked to the Himalayan Mountains in 1973 with biologist George Schaller, hoping against hope to see the elusive and mysterious snow leopard. George Schaller went to study the migratory and mating patterns of the Himalayan Blue Sheep, a scientific investigation of reputable merit. Matthiessen went with him, ostensibly to do the same. But in reality he went hoping to see the rarest and most beautiful of the great cats, the snow leopard...

"The snow leopard," Belden Lane writes, "is a symbol of ultimate reality, that fleeting beauty we see only in occasional snatches. Hiding behind gnarled trees and granite cliffs at four thousand meters, one might be staring at it only yards away and not see it."

Peter Matthiessen never saw the snow leopard on that trip. Ironically, it was George Schaller, the one *not* looking for the great cat, who saw it, two weeks after Matthiessen had left the high country... meaning it was the person making all those meticulous observations of the blue sheep who finally saw the snow leopard...

“Reminding us,” writes Belden Lane, “that truth comes indirectly – sneaking in endwise, engaging us where we least expect it... **That’s how the Eucharist grants new holiness to ordinary bread and wine,**” continues Belden Lane, “**or how the hidden presence of the snow leopard gives new importance to blue sheep.”...**

“Or,” I might add, “how Jesus gave Mary a glimpse of the ultimate reality we call God as she stalked the blue sheep in her encounters with him, and suddenly found herself eye to eye with the snow leopard – this Jesus – who in turn awoke her to the ultimate reality... that fleeting beauty we see only in occasional snatches, whose only passion is love, whose only name is “gasp!,” and in whose **recognized presence** the only response can be this... *(point to Jan Richardson’s painting on the front of the bulletin)*...

The truth is, we are blessed in this human life to glimpse the snow leopard now and then, if we’re awake to his presence in our midst... Or awake enough to recognize her footprints on the edges of an experience, even after it’s over...

And I’m thinking here of the evening decades ago when I heard and saw Kathleen Battle on PBS signing “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands”... Her entire body given over to the music until she became the music...

I’m thinking here of the Reverend Marian Budde speaking directly to Donald Trump less than two months ago, as she stood in the pulpit of the National Cathedral reminding him that the heart of the Judeo-Christian faith is rooted in compassion, empathy and care for the most vulnerable among us...

I'm thinking of the last communion my mother received, just days before her death to ALS, as our little family gathered around my mother's bed (she unable to move, to speak, to swallow)... Pastor Holmer speaking Jesus' words of unfathomable love to us saying, "This is my body, broken for you... This is my blood, shed for you"... and then dipping a piece of the bread into the wine, touching the bread to my mother's lips, and then giving that very piece of love-drenched bread to my father to take into himself...

I'm thinking here of what's happened here at St. Brendan in the past few weeks as we've...

- gathered with the larger community to celebrate the Empty Bowl Supper,
- as we've gathered on Wednesday mornings to study and talk about art work from around the world depicting images of the resurrection,
- and as we've gathered for Sunday worship and Wednesday evening vespers to receive the Eucharist, to hear Connie's exquisite music, and to listen to reflections of lament and grief and hope given by St. Brendan folks using unlikely things like rope, hand-knit sweaters, and white cloth...

All of these gatherings and gifts offering encounters with blue sheep that in turn offered glimpses of the snow leopard, or foot prints that hinted at her presence, were any of us willing to recognize what it was we were seeing hiding only yards away from us behind bread and wine, and pianos and violins, and soup bowls and round tables and art work and hymnals and lecterns and ordinary St. Brendan people...

I think John told the story of Mary's anointing of Jesus the way he did so we might see through her eyes what she saw in Jesus' eyes, which was the Snow Leopard... Or, to use C. S. Lewis' name for that beautiful, untamable, wild creature, we might imagine that presence to be "Aslan" with his flashing eyes and flowing mane... Or William Blake's "Tiger, Tiger, burning bright"... a Christ so fierce with love that when we finally catch a glimpse of the Sacred presence we think we are stalking, we find that that Sacred presence is stalking us...

Waiting for us to sense his presence, to sense her presence crouching in the ordinary events and stuff of our lives, so we might glimpse that ultimate reality, that fleeting beauty that shines at the heart of everything... that Sacred presence whose only passion is love, **for whom** there is no adequate name except, "Gasp!" and **to whom** there is no adequate response except something this (*point to Jan Richardson's painting*)...

I think this (*point to Jan Richardson's painting*)... is what John hoped the story of Mary's anointing of Jesus would do to his readers... I think he hoped that they (we) would look through Mary's eyes when she looked at Jesus, and see the Snow Leopard looking at us, his fierce and flashing eyes ablaze with love...

And if that was John's intention, it would be enough... More than enough... More perhaps, than most of us would even want...

But, as I have pondered the story this week, I think there is something else John may be inviting us to see... and that is the possibility that as Mary took off her headdress... as she knelt down on the floor next to Jesus, anointed his feet with the costly perfumed oil, and wiped his feet with her hair...

I think it's possible that in the extravagant, scandalous act of love Mary lavished upon him, Jesus **glimpsed the snow leopard in her**, inspiring him just a few days later to wash his disciples' feet (including those of Judas) with the same extravagant, scandalous love, and giving him, just before his passion and death, the assurance that the snow leopard was still on the move, and would still be on the move, even when death thought for certain it had had the last word...

Suggesting that for Jesus, the evening when Mary anointed his feet and wiped them with her hair was Jesus' glimpse of Easter morning... an encounter with the snow leopard for which he had no other word than "gasp!" and no other response except this... (*point to Jan Richardson's painting on the cover of the bulletin*).

I love that idea... that just as Mary had caught a glimpse of the snow leopard in Jesus, he caught a glimpse of the snow leopard in her... the snow leopard who points to a mystery beyond even himself... beyond even herself... The mystery of a love that burns at the heart of everything, giving it purpose and meaning and light...

A love that cannot be contained or silenced or long buried in a tomb, but who comes looking for us again and again, waiting for us to see... to recognize him crouched in the ordinary stuff of our lives (even the most derelict and broken and God-forsaken)... and once recognized (even there), to respond in the way of Mary, in the way of Jesus, in the way of Jan Richardson's messy, earthy, crazy, extravagant piece of art...

So that even in these dark days, others might come to sense, to see, to know, to trust that in every here and every now... hiding in places we'd least expect ... there is the Snow Leopard looking at each of us, his fierce and flashing eyes ablaze with love... "Gasp!"