

The Supper at Bethany

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John 12:1-11 RSV

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. There they made him a supper; Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at table with him.

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But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was to betray him), said, "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" This he said, not that he cared for the poor but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box he used to take what was put into it.

Jesus said, "Let her alone, let her keep it for the day of my burial. The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me."

When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came, not only on account of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus also to death, because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus.

Some people never learn.

Here's Lazarus, whom Jesus has raised from the dead only a few days ago, after he'd already been in the tomb four days. And now the religious authorities are plotting to put Lazarus to death *again* — as if they haven't figured out by this time that, where Jesus is present, *death is just not going to stick!*

It's embarrassing, after all, to have a fellow like Lazarus around. As John tells us, people were starting to believe in Jesus because He had summoned Lazarus back from the grave. That's just the sort of thing the Jews had been looking for; as Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 1:22, "Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom." If the Jews could see some evidence of God's power at work to help them solve their problems — and death is certainly a problem — then they might put their faith in the Person through whom God was working these miraculous signs. That's what a lot of them hoped the Messiah would be. So if Jesus could turn water into wine at a wedding feast, or feed a multitude with five barley loaves and two fish, or give sight to a man blind from his birth, then it's no wonder people were beginning to wonder if He might be their Messianic deliverer. Even Jesus' disciples had the same idea, right up to His ascension into heaven when they asked Him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6).

Yes, as Paul said, "Jews demand signs." And the "sign" many Jews, including the Pharisees, really wanted the Messiah to perform would be to throw off the yoke of Roman oppression and restore their independence. If that was the case, then why weren't the Jewish religious authorities, the high priests, just *thrilled* to discover that here was a potential leader of their nation, a Man who could even raise the dead and might be their Messiah? Why did they want to kill Lazarus, and thereby "destroy the evidence" that the power of God was at work in this man Jesus?

We got the answer to that last week, in a passage Craig read from chapter 11 of John's Gospel:

So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council, and said, "What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on thus, every one will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation."

But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all [that is, 'You stupid idiots!']; you do not understand that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish" (John 11:47-50).

John explains that Caiaphas didn't understand what he was saying; he was as stupid as the rest of them. Without intending to do so, as high priest he prophesied that by His death Jesus would bring together all the children of God, both Jew and Gentile — just as Paul wrote to the Galatians: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us — for it is written, 'Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree' — that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham *might come upon the Gentiles*, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (Galatians 3:13-14).

But Caiaphas and the other priests couldn't see this. They weren't thinking in terms of being a blessing to all the nations of the earth, as God had called Abraham to be (Genesis 12:3). Instead, their only thought was to protect their precarious position as the religious leaders of a nation captive to a pagan foreign power. A Man doing miraculous signs was *dangerous*. If the people took him for their Messiah and rose up to throw off the Roman yoke, their whole system would be crushed under the merciless Roman boot. And that's exactly what happened in the year 70, when the armies of Rome destroyed Jerusalem and burned the Temple — just as Jesus had warned the Judeans when He told them, "Unless you repent [of this politically revolutionary hope] you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:5).

You see, the signs Jesus performed — his miracles, especially the raising of Lazarus — could be so easily misunderstood. They weren't intended to be ends in themselves. When you're driving and you see the sign that says, "St. Louis, 75 Miles" with perhaps a route number and an arrow, you don't ask, "Are we there yet?" The sign only *points beyond itself* to something else that it signifies. The signs Jesus gives us point beyond our world of space and time into the greater dimensions of God's new creation. In Jesus, the Word made flesh, God is doing a new thing, bringing "the light of life" to people who've been walking in darkness since the sin of Adam brought death to humankind. Instead, the Jews mistook the signs for the reality they signified. They were interpreting Jesus's signs through their own *cultural agenda*. If a Man can raise people from the dead, he might be able to lead a successful revolt and give us political freedom, right?

"Jews demand signs," and all too often *we're the Jews*. If a Man can raise the dead, he should be able to raise up leaders to rescue our nation from a disastrous government policy. If a Man can provide enough wine to keep wedding partygoers happy, he must be able to satisfy our need for entertainment, even if it's just foot-tapping gospel music. If a Man can feed a multitude from a boy's school lunch bucket, he must be able to solve the problem of world hunger. If a Man can give sight to the blind, heal a paralytic or restore a withered hand, he should be able to resolve the healthcare issue. If a Man can cast out demons, he should be able to deal with our emotional hurts and psychological dysfunctions. Those are things that fit the framework of our cultural values, and we "Jews" are looking to Jesus to perform the signs that fit right into that framework. But in that case it's the culture — not the Lord's purpose — that's setting the agenda, "calling the shots."

So, if it wasn't God's answer to *our* cultural expectations, how did Jesus' raising of Lazarus mesh with His purpose in Jesus Christ? To what reality did this sign point? Let's back up to the beginning of our passage from John 12:

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. There they made him a supper; Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at table with him (John 12:1-2).

What's happening here, in this supper at Bethany? There are two "signs" here, or two events that point beyond themselves to another reality. The first is Lazarus himself, the friend whom Jesus has raised from the dead. His being there is a sign pointing beyond himself to a resurrection yet to come — the resurrection of the Son of God and, of course, the resurrection of all who belong to Jesus. For in His resurrection Jesus is "the first-born among many brethren," as Paul calls Him (Romans 8:29). He declares, $\epsilon\iota\ \tau\iota\varsigma\ \epsilon\nu\ \chi\rho\iota\sigma\tau\omega,$ $\kappa\alpha\iota\ \nu\eta\ \kappa\tau\iota\sigma\iota\varsigma$ — "If any one is in Christ, there is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). The resurrection of Christ holds the promise that our corrupt world will be delivered from its "bondage to decay," for "the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God" (Romans 8:19). Lazarus, here at Bethany, is a kind of "sneak preview" of what is to come, once Jesus Christ has defeated death and opened up the new creation to all who enter, by faith, into His life.

What will this new creation look like? It doesn't mesh with our cultural expectations, or fit into their framework. We can't describe it in terms of our four-dimensional experience because it breaks in from beyond the space-time universe we occupy. There are really no words for it; as Paul said, these are "things that cannot be told, which man may not utter" (2 Corinthians 12:4). Even the Scripture has to use images and symbols drawn from ordinary speech. Thus the Bible speaks of a "new heaven and a new earth," a holy city coming down out of heaven in which God will dwell with His people, a city in which all things are renewed and in which death and sorrow are no more (Revelation 21:1-4). Jesus Christ, raised from the

dead, is the window out of our narrow worldview into this new creation — and, in fact, our only doorway into it. But, within the perimeter of our flat world, it remains a mystery.

There's a second "sign" here at the supper in Bethany. John relates it this way:

Mary took a pound of costly ointment of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment.

But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was to betray him), said, "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" This he said, not that he cared for the poor but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box he used to take what was put into it.

Jesus said, "Let her alone, let her keep it for the day of my burial. The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me" (John 12:3-7).

If Lazarus is the "sign" of Jesus' resurrection, Mary's anointing is the "sign" of Jesus' death. It's another preview, a *preview of the cross*. Just as the women were prepared to do in that morning of the third day after His crucifixion, Mary — Jesus says — is anointing Him for His burial.

Once again, like the sign of Lazarus, the sign of Mary's anointing can be understood superficially in terms of our cultural expectations. And Judas, indeed, takes it the wrong way. He's highly offended at Mary's action: "What useless extravagance! This expensive ointment could have been sold for a lot of money, and we could have given it to the poor!" John explains that Judas didn't care about the poor, but only wanted the money for himself. Yet even if he had *really* wanted to help the poor, he still would have misunderstood Mary's sign in terms of his cultural values. Poverty is nobody's favorite condition; even corrupt dictators have to pretend they're doing something about it. Jesus Himself was tested on this very point, when the devil said, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread" (Matthew 4:3). "Jews demand signs" — feed the hungry, solve our economic problems, and we'll believe You! And Judas, whose name in Hebrew is *Judah*, the word from which we get *Jew*, is the perfect sign-demanding Jew here. Will we also be sign-demanding "Jews," and miss the point of Mary's "sign" because it doesn't mesh with *our* expectations?

"The poor you always have with you," Jesus replies. In Mark's Gospel He adds, "and you can do good to them whenever you want to" (Mark 14:7). Let's never forget that Christ *does* want us to help the needy. But, here at Bethany, that's not the point. "The poor you have always with you, but you do not always have Me." Mary's anointing is a sign that Jesus must bear the cross, taking upon Himself the curse that follows when the people God chose to be His own proved unfaithful to Him.

The sign of Mary, the death that Jesus must die; the sign of Lazarus, the resurrection into the new creation. By putting them together in his account of the supper in Bethany, John is making a point: the way to the resurrection is *through the cross*, the way to life is through death. They go hand in hand, just as Paul reminded the Romans: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. . . . So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and *alive to God* in Christ Jesus" (Romans 6:3-4, 11).

"Jews demand signs," Paul said, "and Greeks seek wisdom." Interestingly, the Greeks show up later in this same chapter, in verses 20-21: "Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.'"

Were these Greeks, whoever they were, looking for *wisdom* just as the Jews were looking for signs? Did they want to see Jesus, not to witness some powerful miracle but to receive some erudite or recondite intellectual *explanation* of who Jesus is, some piece of wisdom that would fit their philosophical paradigm? Just as we try to make Jesus's *signs* fit into our cultural framework, so we also try to give Jesus and His teachings, and even the entire Bible, a certain *meaning* by forcing them into the mold of our culture's way of thinking. Maybe these Greeks weren't looking for that, but in any case Jesus's response to them was consistent with what happened at the supper in Bethany: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless

a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John 12:24-25).

“Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom,” wrote Paul, “*but we preach Christ crucified*, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Corinthians 1:22-25).

“Jews demand signs.” Will we continue to be “Jews,” asking Jesus to solve our problems according to the values of our four-dimensional world? “Greeks seek wisdom.” Will we continue to be “Greeks,” expecting Christ to answer our questions about the meaning of life in terms that fit the parameters of our space-time universe? The gospel shows us neither signs nor wisdom, but *faith* — confidence in God, obedience to God, *whether or not* we behold the signs or gain the wisdom. Because God is “all in all.”

Jesus doesn’t fit our agenda but God’s agenda, the plan “which God decreed before the ages” (1 Corinthians 2:7), an agenda that comes from beyond what we’re able to conceive in terms of the flat world we live in. God’s agenda, both transcending and permeating our worldly life, might be that we should simply be “alive to God,” to behold Him face to face, to commune with Him as in Eden, to dwell in Him as He dwells in us. And the way to that vision, that new creation, is through the cross *that calls into question all our usual questions*.

So when we’re confronted by that Man upon the cross, we might want to start asking some different questions. Not, “Lord, when are You going to solve my problems?” Not “Lord, when are You going to explain everything to me?” But “Lord, what’s Your plan to bring in Your new creation — what’s my part in that plan, and how do I become alive to You?”

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