

Homily for Monday in Holy Week

April 6, 2009

Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas

Grace Church, Amherst, MA

Isaiah 42:1-9

Hebrews 9:11-15

Psalms 36:5-11

John 12:1-11

*See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them. Amen.*

### Anointing at Bethany

Here we are on Monday in Holy Week, launched like a boat into the deep currents of sacred history. As we set out on this journey, we bring with us our particular hopes and dreams, our concerns and fears, and we ask God to help us set them in the context of what is ultimately true and ultimately real. We ask God to help us understand more fully who Jesus is and what he has done for us. We ask God to help us follow Jesus in walking the way of the cross, and, as today's Collect says, to "find it none other than the way of life and peace."

You and I hear the events of Holy Week in relation to what is on our hearts and minds just now, and for me, the words and actions of Holy Week take place this year in relation to the distress of the natural world. Sometimes it seems that I can almost hear the relentless melting of glaciers as our climate heats up. The Arctic was predicted to melt at the end of the century; a week or two ago we learned that it will probably melt in just 30 years. This morning I learned that a vast ice bridge in the Antarctic collapsed last Saturday, a sudden and unusually dramatic result of global warming. Last Friday that enormous ice bridge, apparently in place for the past 10,000 years, was intact. Last Saturday it splintered.

I come to tonight's Gospel story and I wonder: what word is God giving us tonight? How is God calling us tonight to come alive? What message of hope and truth does the Spirit want to convey to us just now, at this critical moment in history, when we have such a short span of time in which to act quickly and effectively to heal our beautiful and ailing planet?

Tonight's Gospel invites us to enter a home in the village of Bethany, where a small circle of friends has gathered for the evening meal. Lazarus is

the host, and his sister Martha is serving the meal. At some point during dinner, Lazarus' other sister, Mary, takes a large quantity of expensive perfume, anoints Jesus' feet, and then wipes his feet with her hair. Judas objects, and Jesus defends her.

It is Mary who catches my eye tonight, Mary who perhaps can be a friend in Christ and give us a word from God. What do I see in Mary? Three things.

First, I see a woman who has spent time with Jesus and has come to know and love him. Mary has watched Jesus console and challenge, beckon and invite, admonish and teach, weep and laugh. She has found in him a man so transparent to God, so filled with God's Spirit, that if God could take human form, you would say -- This is what God is like! If God could speak in a human voice or look at us with human eyes, this is how God's voice would sound and what God's voice would say! This is how lovingly God's eyes would look into yours! And Mary has seen Jesus' power up close. At one point she knelt, weeping, at Jesus' feet, when her brother Lazarus died, and then watched in amazement as Jesus called him back to life. Now she kneels again at Jesus' feet, this time to anoint his feet with fragrant perfume, as if preparing his body for burial.

That is the first thing I want to say about Mary: from this loving gesture we can see that she has cast her lot with Jesus. She has come to know and trust the God who is manifest in him. In Jesus she has experienced the healing and liberating power of God, and she will follow Jesus, and the divine Spirit that is working through him, to the end.

And here's the second thing. Mary is acutely aware of the darkness and danger of the moment. She is not living in some kind of bubble of happy piety. Ever since Jesus raised her brother Lazarus from the dead, the civil and religious authorities have been actively looking for Jesus, planning to arrest him and put him to death. The tension around Jesus is reaching the breaking point, and the forces of darkness and death are closing in. In fact, they are already inside that apparently safe haven in Bethany, for Judas the betrayer is speaking up with his lies, pretending to care for the poor when in fact he is stealing from the box of money that Jesus and the disciples share.

Yes, Mary is highly aware of the darkness. But what does she do? Does she cower in fear? Is she paralyzed by anxiety? Does she lash out in anger? No. She acts boldly, even extravagantly, in love. And that is my third point: Mary acts in love. And with such lavishness, too, in that

sensual, even erotic gesture of pouring perfume over Jesus' feet and wiping it away with her hair! It is a scandalous act, for respectable Jewish women would never appear in public with their hair unbound. But in that moment of self-abandon and self-giving, Mary does not seem to care. She allows herself to express all the love that is in her, to give herself fully to the one who has loved her so fully and who will soon pour out his life for her -- and for all -- on the cross.

As I listen to this story tonight, as I tremble for our children and grandchildren, and wonder what sort of world we will leave them, I hear God addressing us through the person of Mary of Bethany. Stay with Jesus, she would tell us. Listen to him. Watch him. Follow him.

And -- she would say -- face the darkness. Don't pretend it is not here. For it is, around us and within us.

And -- I think she would also say -- don't be afraid. Keep on loving, even in the darkness. Be bold in your love. Don't hold back, for the love you have to give -- the acts of kindness that you can offer, your own bold gestures of justice and creativity and compassion -- are like a balm to a hurting world, like a fine perfume whose fragrance fills the house.

What I want you to hear is that Jesus' story is our story, and that Mary of Bethany's story is our story, too. Easter morning has not yet come for Mary in the story that we hear tonight, and yet she is fearless in her love. Like Jesus, like Mary, we are on a path straight through the darkness, and, like them, too, we need not recoil in fear. Tonight, in the midst of darkness, we open our hearts, and give and receive extravagant love.

How does that love speak in your heart tonight?