
A Tale of Two Marys

John 12:1-11 and Luke 1:26-38

A Sermon preached on Holy Monday and the Feast of Annunciation on March 25, 2013

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Today is March 25. It is the Monday of Holy week. It is also the day the church celebrates the Feast of the Annunciation...when the angel Gabriel appears to Mary to tell her she would bear a child (you'll note that precisely nine months from today is Christmas Day, owing to the fact that Jesus was perfect, and would most assuredly have been born precisely on time). It turns out that about four times in the last century (and not at evenly placed intervals) Holy Monday and the Feast of the Annunciation coincide. And so I want to use this opportunity to talk about these two Marys from today's two gospel lessons. There is Mary, the mother of God, who on this day prepares for Jesus' birth. And there is Mary of Bethany, who on this day prepares for Jesus' death.

In Luke we learn of young Mary, who is visited by an angel with some rather astonishing news. The news is preceded by the words, "do not be afraid, Mary" which is usually biblical code for "yes, you should probably be at least a little afraid." One can only assume that Gabriel assures Mary to *not be afraid* because he knew that Mary very likely was. It isn't every day that divine messengers make appearances in one's life. And this news is rather unprecedented, before or since, as Gabriel announces that Mary is soon to give birth to the son of God. And after Mary's initial perplexity over the biological impossibility of such news, she responds in faith, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

If you think about it, Mary's response is really rather remarkable. Her initial objection is on biological grounds, not personal or theological one's. She never protests that this is a bad idea, that she's fundamentally unworthy, that this will ruin her reputation, or that she's not up for the task. Her response is at once both simple and extravagant, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." The response is simple, because it is a clear "yes" seemingly without protest or despair, only deference to God. It is extravagant, because this "yes" will involve the whole of her body and the whole of her life, and even more of her heart than she yet knows. Mary's love for God and trust in God renders her willing to accept all the possible ruin and heartbreak even with great cost to self. This is extravagance. This is trust. This is the beautiful, selfless, even ridiculous action of a woman whose faith in God is so complete, that she is able to say, without hesitation, "Let it be with me, according to your word."

Let's now turn to the other Mary, Mary of Bethany. In the gospel reading from John, we know that Jesus and Lazarus (newly raised from the dead) and his sisters Mary and Martha, as well as a few other disciples, have gathered for a celebratory meal in Lazarus' home. We also know it is a scant week before Jesus' death. But, no one is seeing it. No one, that is, except for Mary. And Mary of Bethany is afraid, just as Mary the mother of God was afraid. But for different reasons. Because Mary has already realized this will not end well. She can sense that Jesus' days are coming to an end...and this most holy man is about to face his own death...she must feel deep fear and grief. And Mary does something that is rather extraordinary. She takes a pound of pure nard and starts pouring it over Jesus' feet and washing them with her hair. This is quite an unexpected show. It is sensual (women did not wear their hair loosely), it is costly, it is fragrant, and it is profoundly loving. It is a gesture of overwhelming gratitude and a gesture of gentle preparation. And it is worth noting that Judas' objection is legitimate...a pound is a ridiculous amount of perfume. We know this because Judas calculates the value at 300 denari. A single denari was worth one days wage to the average person in those days, which means the perfume was worth 10 months of wages. Imagine 10 months of paychecks translated into nard, poured and seemingly wasted in one fleeting moment. And the person you'd expect to object is Jesus, but instead he welcomes this gesture, and notes that Mary bought it in preparation for his burial. This Mary has also done something extravagant. She too presents an offering that is beautiful, selfless, and ridiculous...it is the action of one whose love of Jesus is so overwhelming that she is willing to pour an astronomical amount of pure nard on

his feet in a show of love and preparation. It is love that won't fully wash away in a week's time, when those precious anointed feet will be pierced with cruel nails.

These two Marys, Mary the mother of God and Mary of Bethany, teach us something of beautiful, extravagant, and loving gestures. The radical and reckless grace of these gestures may even make us uncomfortable. The author Madeleine L'Engle put it this way, "We are suspicious of grace. We are afraid of the very lavishness of the gift." The lavish actions of these two Marys, one who opens her womb, the other who pours out costly perfume...they may make us feel bewildered by their complete devotion. These Marys may expose to us our own lack and stinginess when it comes to the life of God. They may make you stop to wonder: are there places that you find yourself wanting to do something beautiful and generous and extravagant for God? How can you open yourself to the work of God in you? Or where are the places you can pour out your love in service to Christ? These are good questions.

But it is Holy Week. We know how this week unfolds. And so on this Holy Monday and Feast of the Annunciation, I want to suggest that we remember something else about Mary the mother of God and Mary of Bethany...because these two women's actions point to something else in their love and trust in God. Because their extravagant action isn't ultimately about them. It's about responding to *God*. And their gift to us this Holy Monday is that they point to *God's gift*. And God's gift is God's utter love and devotion to us. In the incarnation and the crucifixion, we see the zenith of God's passion and love for his creation...his absolute yearning to be among us and to share our life...his generous love that became a babe in a manger, who then walked among us....welcoming, teaching, and healing...and who continued a painstaking road to Calvary out of that love. God's one wild and precious life takes on flesh in Mary's womb, and is then poured out and broken like costly perfume in total love and longing for us. At the very center of God's generosity...at the very center of God's selfless, beautiful, and extravagant life is his love for each of us in this room, and so many beyond it. So do not resist God's lavishness...God's wild and even ridiculous love. But do be humbled. Do feel cherished. Do find yourself in the very center of God's heart. Because this week, he's longing to find himself at the center of yours. Amen.¹

¹ I am indebted to former Chapel Dean, Sam Wells, for influencing many of the thoughts in this sermon, specifically on Mary of Bethany's extravagance. As I was preparing this sermon I thought, "I feel this sounds familiar," only to discover he did preach on Mary of Bethany in somewhat similar (yet exceedingly more brilliant) ways. And that friends is called formation ☺