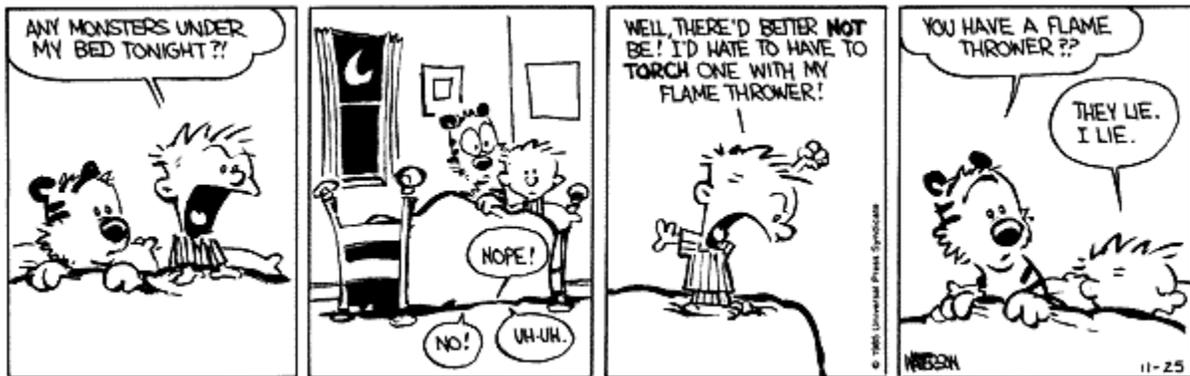


C Lent 5  
 2013 March 17  
 Psalm 126  
 Isaiah 43:16-21  
 Philippians 3:4b-14  
 John 12:1-8  
 "Mary's Apprehension"



If you are familiar with the comic strip you know that Calvin is constantly and always fighting monsters. He normally isn't apprehensive about the presence of monsters, but now and then they set him on edge.

Normally we use the term apprehend in a rather negative sense. Consider the first dictionary definition of the word: to expect with anxiety, suspicion, or fear. But there is another way in which the word apprehend is used. Consider the second definition: to grasp the meaning of; understand, especially intuitively; to perceive.

In today's reading from John, which happens just before Jesus enters Jerusalem for the last time before his arrest, Mary experiences apprehension. Not in the negative sense, but in the sense of grasping, understanding, perceiving who Jesus really is. And her apprehension leads her to an extravagant act of worship.

Think for a minute about some common examples of extravagance. For example, consider the case of a product called Bling H2O, the water that costs \$56 a bottle. . Bling H2O comes in frosted bottles studded with sparkling glass crystals. The crystals look like diamonds.

A fully-loaded 2013 Rolls Royce Phantom will run you \$470,000. I would suppose that price includes just about everything. Apparently some people keep buying them, because Rolls Royce keeps making them.

Or how about your own personal rocket belt, like the one James Bond and the Rocketeer use? You strap it on, light it up, and off you go. Granted, not very far...one of the downsides of the rocket belt is it carries only enough rocket fuel for a flight of a minute or so. They have been around since the 1960's but only recently has someone

started to market them commercially. Only \$250,000 including training and equipment to produce your own rocket fuel.

What about perfume? All of us know that perfumes can get really pricey. How about \$435,000 for 17 ounces? Imperial Majesty is the most expensive perfume in the world. Would it smell as sweet at any other price? Actually, yes. Imperial Majesty is a limited edition of a Clive Christian signature scent. Sold simply as No. 1, the fragrance is priced at \$2,400 an ounce. But the reason Imperial Majesty costs so much is that Christian, a British designer-turned-perfumer, poured 17 ounces of No. 1 into a Baccarat crystal bottle and stuck a five-carat diamond into the 18-carat gold collar.

Today's gospel passage is also a story of wasteful extravagance. Jesus and his disciples are invited to eat at the home of Mary and Martha and Lazarus in the little town of Bethany, just a few miles outside Jerusalem. You may remember that Lazarus is the friend of Jesus who had died some weeks before. He had died. He had been in his tomb for four days, we read in John, chapter 11, when Jesus came to Bethany and called him out of the tomb. And indeed, Lazarus came out. He was dead, and now was alive. At the time, both of Lazarus's sisters were overcome by grief. You can imagine their joy and thankfulness at having their dead brother restored to them.

While Jesus is dining with his disciples and Lazarus and probably others, Mary comes to him with a pound of nard, a very expensive perfume. Maybe something like Clive Christian #1. We know that this fragrance was made from the roots of a plant found only in the foothills of the Himalaya mountains. It was rare and costly.

Mary pours the perfume on Jesus' feet and then wipes his feet with her hair. Judas Iscariot, the disciple who will very shortly betray Jesus to the Jewish religious authorities, complains that the perfume could have been sold for 300 denarii, and the money given to the poor. John implies also that Judas was not really concerned about the poor, but wanted only to line his own pockets with the proceeds from the sale.

Now you may remember that a denarius was the standard Roman coin of Jesus' day, the typical income of one day's work for a hired laborer. So a common laborer would earn around three or four hundred denarii in a year. The nard that Mary poured on Jesus' feet was worth about a year's income for a regular, run of the mill laborer. No wonder Judas was horrified and incensed!

This story in John has parallels in all of the other gospels. There are some rather significant differences in each account, and it does us good to keep from confusing them. The woman in John's gospel is a dear friend; in Luke's gospel she is a (quote) sinner; in Mark and Matthew she is not identified at all. In none of the gospels is she Mary Magdalene, so don't be confused by those fables that have somehow been propagated.

In Mark, Matthew, and John, Jesus tells the woman's critics to leave her alone, that she is anointing his body (in advance) for burial. It is not clear that Mary knows she is doing

this, but it is certainly very possible. We have read in the passage just preceding this one that the chief priests and Pharisees in Jerusalem are now looking for Jesus in order to have him arrested and executed. In John's gospel, the raising of Lazarus is the last straw. Jesus is becoming much too popular and dangerous to have him wandering around the Palestinian countryside, teaching, preaching, healing, and exorcising demons.

So maybe Mary does know that Jesus will soon die. And perhaps she knows it just because she knows it; Luke shows her to be especially perceptive and eager for the gospel, sitting at Jesus' feet while he teaches. Mary apprehends who Jesus is. It could be that Mary knew Jesus would soon die because she shared an intense personal connection with him. The type of connection all of us should eagerly want.

In just a few days Jesus will have a final supper with his disciples. Only in John do we read that he will remove his outer robe, wrap a towel around his waist, and wash his disciples' feet using a large basin. In a way, Mary anticipates this astounding sign of humility and service. Jesus will wash his disciples' feet. Mary anoints Jesus' feet.

What motivates Mary to "waste" an expensive jar of perfume in order to clean and moisturize Jesus' tired feet? It may have been partly out of thankfulness, that her brother, who was dead, is now alive. It may have been because she anticipated his death, and was anointing his body in advance. But I believe there is another, even more fundamental reason that Mary chose to enact this tender demonstration of love and devotion. I think Mary knew, perhaps like no one else among Jesus' followers, who he really was.

In John's gospel, it's not as if Jesus was trying to keep his identity a secret. Indeed, of all the gospels, John is the one who most clearly and fully identifies Jesus as Son of God, and as God. Consider for example, all of those "I am" sayings that John is so famous for. Jesus tells his followers, I am the bread of life. I am the light of the world. I am the gate for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I am the resurrection and the life. I am the way, the truth, and the life. I am the true vine. In other places in John, Jesus says simply, I am. Those Jews who heard these words would immediately have been reminded of God's response to Moses on Mount Sinai, when Moses asked him by what name he should be called. The LORD responded, I AM. Tell the Israelites, I AM has sent me to you.

Jesus tells the Samaritan woman at the well, I am the Messiah. As if the teachings and miracles and healings and exorcisms were not sufficient evidence, Jesus tells those who will listen, openly and plainly, that he is the Son of God. Most of his followers simply don't get it, or they get it only in part.

Mary gets it. The cost of the nard is inconsequential in comparison to the opportunity to honor the Son of God. A year's wage is as nothing. Ten years' wages are nothing. A lifetime of income is nothing compared to the immeasurable privilege and joy of

worshiping the Lamb of God, who in the words of John the Baptist, takes away the sin of the world.

The question is, are you and I among those who get it? We are tempted by so many distractions, so many idols, that would draw us away from the only real person who is worthy of worship. Some of those distractions seem very worthwhile: caring for the poor, for example. Jesus shocks us when he says, You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me. Jesus spoke these words to those around him, who knew him in the flesh, for he soon would be taken away from them.

In truth, of course, Jesus has not been taken from us. We still have intimacy with him, if we will only grasp it, each day. But his teaching to his disciples remains the same: worship me, first. Honor me, first. Seek me, first. Follow me, first. I am the way, the truth, and the life. Be in corporate worship each Lord's Day. Spend time each day in prayer, not only in praying for others and yourself, but in adoration and thanksgiving for all that God has done for you, in and through me, the Messiah. Then go and care for the poor, filled with the power and wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

There is no wasteful extravagance when it comes to giving our lives to Christ. No price is too high. No sacrifice is too costly. Everything else is of minor importance.

C.S. Lewis wrote, "Christianity is a statement which, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important."

Mary got it. Do we?