

Palm Sunday

March 28, 2021

Sermon by Rev. Zachary W. Johnson

Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church
Pasadena, California

Gospel: Mark 14:1--15:47

¹It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him; ²for they said, “Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people.” ³While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. ⁴But some were there who said to one another in anger, “Why was the ointment wasted in this way? ⁵For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.” And they scolded her. ⁶But Jesus said, “Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. ⁷For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. ⁸She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. ⁹Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.” ¹⁰Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. ¹¹When they heard it, they were greatly pleased, and promised to give him money. So he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

¹²On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed, his disciples said to him, “Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?” ¹³So he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, “Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him, ¹⁴and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, ‘The Teacher asks, Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?’ ¹⁵He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there.” ¹⁶So the disciples set out and went to the city, and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal. ¹⁷When it was evening, he came with the twelve. ¹⁸And when they had taken their places and were eating, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me.” ¹⁹They began to be



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distressed and to say to him one after another, “Surely, not I?” ²⁰He said to them, “It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the bowl with me. ²¹For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.” ²²While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, “Take; this is my body.” ²³Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. ²⁴He said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. ²⁵Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.” ²⁶When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. ²⁷And Jesus said to them, “You will all become deserters; for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.’ ²⁸But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.” ²⁹Peter said to him, “Even though all become deserters, I will not.” ³⁰Jesus said to him, “Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.” ³¹But he said vehemently, “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.” And all of them said the same. ³²They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” ³³He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. ³⁴And he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.” ³⁵And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. ³⁶He said, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.” ³⁷He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, “Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour? ³⁸Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” ³⁹And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. ⁴⁰And once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to say to him. ⁴¹He came a third time and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴²Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.” ⁴³Immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; and with him there was a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. ⁴⁴Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, “The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard.” ⁴⁵So when he came, he went up to him at once and said, “Rabbi!” and kissed him. ⁴⁶Then they laid hands on him and arrested him. ⁴⁷But one of those who stood near drew his sword and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. ⁴⁸Then Jesus said to them, “Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? ⁴⁹Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not



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arrest me. But let the scriptures be fulfilled.”⁵⁰All of them deserted him and fled.⁵¹A certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him,⁵²but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked.⁵³They took Jesus to the high priest; and all the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes were assembled.⁵⁴Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest; and he was sitting with the guards, warming himself at the fire.⁵⁵Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for testimony against Jesus to put him to death; but they found none.⁵⁶For many gave false testimony against him, and their testimony did not agree.⁵⁷Some stood up and gave false testimony against him, saying,⁵⁸“We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.’”⁵⁹But even on this point their testimony did not agree.⁶⁰Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, “Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?”⁶¹But he was silent and did not answer. Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?”⁶²Jesus said, “I am; and ‘you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power,’ and ‘coming with the clouds of heaven.’”⁶³Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, “Why do we still need witnesses?⁶⁴You have heard his blasphemy! What is your decision?” All of them condemned him as deserving death.⁶⁵Some began to spit on him, to blindfold him, and to strike him, saying to him, “Prophecy!” The guards also took him over and beat him.⁶⁶While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant-girls of the high priest came by.⁶⁷When she saw Peter warming himself, she stared at him and said, “You also were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth.”⁶⁸But he denied it, saying, “I do not know or understand what you are talking about.” And he went out into the forecourt. Then the cock crowed.⁶⁹And the servant-girl, on seeing him, began again to say to the bystanders, “This man is one of them.”⁷⁰But again he denied it. Then after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, “Certainly you are one of them; for you are a Galilean.”⁷¹But he began to curse, and he swore an oath, “I do not know this man you are talking about.”⁷²At that moment the cock crowed for the second time. Then Peter remembered that Jesus had said to him, “Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.” And he broke down and wept.^{15:1}As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate.²Pilate asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” He answered him, “You say so.”³Then the chief priests accused him of many things.⁴Pilate asked him again, “Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you.”⁵But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.⁶Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked.⁷Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder



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during the insurrection. ⁸So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. ⁹Then he answered them, “Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?” ¹⁰For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. ¹¹But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. ¹²Pilate spoke to them again, “Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?” ¹³They shouted back, “Crucify him!” ¹⁴Pilate asked them, “Why, what evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Crucify him!” ¹⁵So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified. ¹⁶Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor’s headquarters); and they called together the whole cohort. ¹⁷And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. ¹⁸And they began saluting him, “Hail, King of the Jews!” ¹⁹They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. ²⁰After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him. ²¹They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus. ²²Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). ²³And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it. ²⁴And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take. ²⁵It was nine o’clock in the morning when they crucified him. ²⁶The inscription of the charge against him read, “The King of the Jews.” ²⁷And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left. ²⁹Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, “Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, ³⁰save yourself, and come down from the cross!” ³¹In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. ³²Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.” Those who were crucified with him also taunted him. ³³When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ³⁴At three o’clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” ³⁵When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, “Listen, he is calling for Elijah.” ³⁶And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.” ³⁷Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. ³⁸And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. ³⁹Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, “Truly this man was God’s Son!” ⁴⁰There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the



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mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. ⁴¹These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem. ⁴²When evening had come, and since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath, ⁴³Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. ⁴⁴Then Pilate wondered if he were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he had been dead for some time. ⁴⁵When he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph. ⁴⁶Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. ⁴⁷Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where the body was laid.

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I find it quite fascinating that Mark's passion story begins with the story of this woman who takes very costly aromatic ointments and pours it all over Jesus' head in preparation for his burial. It was such an extravagant gift that it made others who were dining at Simon's home very uncomfortable. The only way they could try and escape their discomfort was to chastise the woman for her gift. Jesus, of course, saw right through their facade and brought deeper meaning to the extravagant act of grace.

Unfortunately, the brokenness of human sin over the generations has convinced us that extravagant grace is not something that exists. We live in a society that firmly understands and promotes the idea that there is no such thing as a free lunch. Everything given to us must be earned, paid for with a price. Sometimes the price is hard labor, years of monotony, our health, our morals, crippling debt, or sometimes our very lives. There is always a price.

Because of this, when we do witness an act of extravagant grace, our immediate reaction is usually discomfort. We feel too vulnerable in those moments, almost like we are seen as weak, especially when we are the recipients of that extravagant grace. This is why there are a lot of people in society who refuse to ask for help from others. Part of it is our need to be in control. When we receive extravagant grace, we are not in control. So, we try and compensate by offering to return the favor in some way, or just outright trying to refuse the gift of extravagant grace.



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Unfortunately, there are also denominations of Christianity who cannot accept extravagant grace, so they come up with theologies that place the person in control with an understanding that each person must choose to accept Jesus in their hearts. Or, that a person must have some kind of “come-to-Jesus moment” where they are converted. And once they are Christian, they must continue to prove their worthiness by the number of people they convert to Christianity, or by the number of good deeds they do each day. Of course, some people are told they cannot become Christians in these denominations because their race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or social status.

But here is the truth of it all, the entire passion story is an act of extravagant grace for the entire world, for generations past, present, and future. This woman’s gift of the costly ointment is but a foreshadow to the amazing thing that God is about to do! The world is about to be turned upside down as God shows us that salvation is not earned by some good deed - it can’t be bought with money or hard labor - but it is given freely to us through death on the cross.

The image of the woman pouring this fragrant ointment on Jesus’ head stirs memories in my head of when I laid hands on the heads of others, prayed over them, and anointed their heads with oil for healing. It also reminds me of those times I received the laying on of hands, prayer, and anointing for my own healing. I will never forget the fresh smell of lavender upon my forehead as the healing minister used the oil to make the sign of the cross. The fragrant oil upon my head was a reminder that God still claims me as a beloved child, but it also was a reminder of the greater healing that the world has received through Christ on the cross. When I was the one doing the healing rite, it was always my hope that the prayer, laying on of hands, and anointing with that lavender oil was reminding the recipient of God’s love for them and that great act of healing Jesus accomplished through the cross.

The extravagant gift of grace that we witness each year during Holy Week is a reminder to us, the church, that to proclaim the good news is to remind the world that God is grace; God is love; God is forgiveness; God is mercy with no strings attached. Watching Jesus this week as he dines with his closest friends and shows them how to live out the commandment to love each other through washing feet, as we watch Jesus go to Gethsemane to be betrayed and arrested, as we watch him be assaulted by the Chief priests, elders, and the Romans, and as we watch him die on the cross for the sake of the world, we are witnessing God’s strange and



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mysterious love that brings all of us new life when all is said and done. It is indeed the good news, for it is extravagant grace for the world.

What would it look like for we, the church, to act in ways that bring about nothing but extravagant grace to others in our community and in the world? What if we really embrace this extravagant, healing grace that comes through the cross and Easter joy, and commit as a church to find ways to bring healing to those who are broken, dejected, shunned, and outcast? What would it look like to boldly proclaim that, while most places in our world require a price to be paid, we the church are a place where the world will find nothing but extravagant grace?! Extravagant grace that truly says all are welcome here, this is a place where it is safe to be vulnerable, this is a place that will do everything it can to help walk with the person who is going through challenging times, this is the place where all will see and experience the love of Jesus!

The extravagant grace of God that we will see and experience during Holy Week and Easter is the same grace that frees us to heal our community and our world with acts of extravagant love. In doing so, we the church will boldly proclaim to the entire world the amazing joy that comes through a cross and the empty tomb.

Amen.



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