

“The Aroma of Extravagant Presence”

Rev. Susie Maxwell  
Centre Street Congregational Church, UCC  
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*Dedicated to my friend and teacher, Paul Weiss, with love*

Imagine anticipating the worst day of your life. There’s no escaping it. You have to face something that is going to bring you down, tear you apart, break your heart, or somehow destroy you.

But that moment has yet to arrive.

And instead of worrying about what has yet to be, you have the opportunity to be fully present to an extravagant love. Knowing the weight that faces you and has yet to be, could you be fully present to what is now before you?

That’s what Jesus did in this morning’s lesson. He knows his plans to make his entry into Jerusalem. He knows he’s created trouble amongst the empire and religious authorities. He knows he’s disturbed the waters, so to speak, and he knows it is going to cost him his life in an excruciatingly gruesome and painful way. There’s no way around it.

But tonight? Jesus is at the home of his friends Lazarus, Martha, and Mary. Even cranky Judas is hanging out with everybody. And there’s Mary at Jesus’ feet, bathing them in the expensive and heavily fragrant nard with her long hair, and no doubt adding tears and laughter, kisses, and caresses into the mix. Who would want to miss that moment in exchange for something that has yet to be?

Not Jesus. He is fully present, and I think presence is the cosmic point of this story.

But first, let’s remember that each Gospel was written for a particular audience and with a particular message when it came to understanding Jesus’ life, ministry, death, and resurrection. In other words, each Gospel contributes and has something unique to say in their understanding and presentation of Jesus.

For example, although listed second, Mark’s gospel is understood to be written first and appears to be targeted to the Roman believers—particularly Gentiles, meaning the non-Jews. This Gospel focuses on the main points of Jesus’ life and culminates in his death. There is a tone of immediacy and urgency in Mark. As the first Gospel, Mark sets the pattern for all the later gospel traditions.

Matthew was written for Jewish Christians encountering some new tensions in the period of reconstruction after the first revolt and restructuring of Judaism. They need reassurance in the

face of all the changes and their mysterious new way of understanding God. As a result, Matthew carries the theme of Messianic secrecy.

The Gospel according to Luke, like Mark, was written for a Gentile audience in the cities of Asia Minor and Greece. Luke is interested in showing that Christians can be good citizens of the Roman Empire. Luke tries to essentially show that God's love requires no special rituals or purity; it's easy to fit in with God.

We know that both Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source to inform their composition, and it's likely that even John knew something of Mark in tradition—which brings us now to John's Gospel. Biblical scholars Eugene Boring and Fred Craddock write that in John, while there may be *images* that come to mind for the reader—like "the poor," as mentioned in this morning's story—this Gospel has no poor, no widows, no children, no women fellow travelers, no unclean demoniacs, no lepers, no shepherds, no fisherman, no prostitutes, and even no reference to Jesus' compassion and pity.

Instead of developing individuals and the individual deeds of Jesus and his disciples as the other Gospels do, John's Gospel orients us in an enormous way by focusing on the Christ event—Jesus's passion, death and resurrection—as a complete and unitive expression of God's saving grace for the entire world. This expression of saving grace is summed up in the very famous verse 16 in the third chapter of John: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life."

Next week will bring us to Holy Week, beginning with the celebration of Palm Sunday. We will be making our way through Jerusalem with Jesus in his final act of confrontation—which will, of course, lead to his trial and execution.

On Maundy Thursday, a foot washing service here in the sanctuary will help us consider Jesus' service, humility and nearness.

Good Friday will have stations of the cross also here in the sanctuary, offering the opportunity to consider some of what Jesus encountered through his trial, passion, and crucifixion.

Perhaps you're already thinking of your own Easter Sunday dinner plans, and I trust our little ones are looking forward to the Easter Bunny and candy.

But all these things and the rest of the details of your lives are still out there on the horizon.

For now? Be here. Be present. Be in the space with Jesus, Lazarus, Martha, Judas, and Mary. The same story that holds Judas' understandable criticism in the heavy scent of perfume. It is but one story in a line of many that will soon be gone. Even Jesus commanded Judas to be present, saying in verses 7 and 8, "Leave her alone. This perfume was to be used in preparation for my burial, and this is how she has used it. You will always have the poor among you, but you won't always have me."

It is incredible that Jesus can be present in this moment, knowing what his fate is. I think I'd be looking for an escape hatch, or I'd be so fraught with fear that I'd be anywhere in my head but in the room. In my anxiety and distress, I'd probably bark at Mary to get the hell away from me with her suffocating oil and thick hair.

But not Jesus. He tends to what is, not what was or what will be. It is a mind-bending moment *and* testimony to his understanding of what God will do, is doing, and has accomplished through him for all time. Make no mistake—he has fear, and we will hear of it later in the garden of Gethsemane. But for now?

He is present.

So beloveds, what real worries and fears do you spend time with? Things that you know are coming, but have yet to be?

You could make yourself crazy with worry, lose sleep, have many a near miss because of being distracted. You could try to run away. Or numb out with some substances or internet rabbit holes.

Or—you could take a Cosmic cue from Jesus and be present.

In a world full of distractions and countless difficulties and struggles, don't listen to the shadow side of yourself that says what you should do, in the way Judas said what should have been done with the money for the nard. Be here now.

Because the truth is that our worst days will come and—mercifully—they will go.

Knowing that, my prayer for you this week is that you choose to be present and washed in the heavenly fragrance of God's Cosmic extravagant and eternal presence.

Amen.