

Mark 14.3-9  
Mark 15.6-15  
Palm/Passion Sunday

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(A disclaimer: This sermon was written to be spoken, which does not always translate into correct grammatical form for a document written to be read.)

### Saying Yes and Saying No

Unlike the Palm Sunday hymns that we typically sing, the first Palm Sunday was not children singing “sweet hosannas.” The writer of Mark’s gospel wants us to know that the crowd welcomes Jesus as a king—a political figure. This was a political march. People oppressed by Rome for too long, cheering on the anointed one—the one who will save them—who will remove the brutal boot of Roman domination from the necks. They shout “Hosanna!”—a Hebrew word which literally means “Save now!” Jesus comes into Jerusalem at the time of the Passover—a celebration of God’s emancipation of people long enslaved in Egypt. This is not just an innocuous religious celebration. This is a crowd waiting for liberation and expecting that Jesus is the one who will make it happen.

Later that week and two days before the Passover, the religious leaders were looking for a way to arrest Jesus and kill him. Judas makes a deal with them.

(Parenthetically, it has been interesting this week to hear about the discovery of “The Gospel of Judas.” What I’ve read sounds like in this newly discovered gospel Jesus asks Judas to make the arrangements for him to be handed over to the religious authorities in order to fulfill his mission. And he promises Judas reward for doing it. We’ll have to see more what scholars say about this document. We can say for sure that this was definitely not Mark’s perspective!)

In the middle of the political exchange between Judas and the religious leaders, is the story of the woman who anoints Jesus.

Mark uses this technique a lot—splits one story and inserts another to highlight what Jesus is doing or contrast those who get what Jesus is doing with those who are clueless.

Rhetorically then, Mark contrasts the faithful discipleship of a nameless woman who anoints him with the lack of discipleship on the part of the religious leaders and Judas.

So Jesus is at the home of Simon the leper. We’d like it to be Simon the former-leper because a leper was someone a Jew did not want to get close to. They were ritually unclean and if you came in contact with them you too became ritually unclean. And it took seven days to become clean again after being around a leper and the Passover is only two days away. (I don’t know what Jesus is going to do!)

Given the social mores of the time, we can presume there were no other women sitting around the table with Jesus, Simon and the others. So this unnamed woman enters the arena of men with a jar of sweet smelling ointment worth a year’s salary. Imagine the consternation and indignation when she pours it on Jesus’ head. The story doesn’t tell us this but I suppose part of the consternation was this sensual image of a woman with expensive lotion anointing Jesus’ head right there in the middle of all those guys. What we do hear in the story is shock at her extravagance. “What a waste! Do you know how many people that jar of ointment—if sold—could have fed? How many houses it could have constructed? How many computers it could have provided for job training?” Everyone scolds her.

Everyone except Jesus. He defends what she has done for him. And what she has done is anoint him for burial. (And we'll hear a little later in the service that once Jesus is killed his body is not given the respect of anointing before he is buried.<sup>1</sup>)

Brian Blount, who teaches New Testament at Princeton Seminary, reminds us that "Jesus' ministry was really about the reign of God and human preparation for it...one way to prepare for that reign was to help the poor. But that aid, as great an act as it was and is, was only a response to the nearness of the reign [of God]."<sup>2</sup> The ultimate expression of discipleship is being ready for the reign.

And this woman recognizes Jesus as the incarnation of the reign of God. "She knows that what and who [Jesus] represents is more [significant] than everything else there is in life, *even* raising money for the poor."<sup>3</sup>

Unlike the disciples all the way through Mark's gospel, this woman gets it. She recognizes Jesus and acts faithfully in response. Like the widow a few chapters earlier who puts two small copper coins in the offering—giving everything she had—and whose extravagance is praised is by Jesus—this woman in chapter 14 also gives extravagantly.

Do you remember the two-beat rhythm<sup>4</sup> of the Christian life that I talked about at Transfiguration Sunday and Ash Wednesday? That's an image to pick up on again. There's a yes and a no in the life of faith. An extravagance and an austerity.

The woman with the expensive ointment responds to Jesus with the yes of faith. With extravagance and by giving all. She gives her gift, and trusts "that God will respond to that gift in transformative ways. [Jesus says,] 'You always have the poor with you.' You will not always have this moment. Respond, therefore, to this moment. This moment will transform you so that, empowered by it, you will do much more for the poor than [the money for your ointment] ever could."<sup>5</sup>

Now let's turn to the story of Jesus before Pilate. Jesus stands before Pilate because he has been convicted by the religious leaders in a kangaroo court. We know they have been out to get Jesus for a while so their verdict is no surprise. But Pilate, the Roman prefect, is the one who can issue the order for crucifixion.

Thinking about crucifixion, here's a side-bar: If you have not read the account of Jesus' passion in Mark 14 and 15 for a while, I encourage you to do that this week. Read it in the light of all that we've seen and heard about the torture and detainment of prisoners in Guantanamo Bay and in Iraq. As Jesus is sentenced to death, read the story in the light of the number of innocent people who are condemned to death and even executed in our own day.

Now back to Jesus before Pilate. Both Jesus and Barabbas are accused of the same thing: undermining and threatening the power of the imperial court and the religious councils. It was the custom at the Passover for the Roman prefect to release one prisoner. Pilate was no friend of the

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 15. 42-47

<sup>2</sup> Brian K. Blount and Gary W. Charles, *Preaching Mark in Two Voices*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002, p215.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p216.

<sup>4</sup> This idea comes from Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, p195ff.

<sup>5</sup> Blount, p216.

Jews so this wasn't a favor he was doing for them. It was a strategic way of keeping the religious folks satisfied and indebted to the political powers. A way of trading one prisoner for the complacency of the crowd.

Pilate suggests that Jesus be released. He knows the political world—even as it plays out in religious circles. He knows the religious leaders are jealous of the power Jesus has. Power that they did not give to him and power that they cannot seem to take away from him. But they are determined to take that power away from Jesus and so they stir up the crowds to shout for Barabbas to be released and Jesus to be crucified. Mind you, these are the same crowds that less than a week ago were shouting, “Hosanna. Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!” These are the same crowds that expected Jesus to ride into Jerusalem and kick out the Romans. They wanted Jesus to be like Barabbas. But Jesus let them down.

One writer describes Barabbas as “what we today would call a fanatical right-wing zealot determined to stop at nothing to bring in a version of God’s kingdom which consisted of defeating Roman power by Roman means—in other words, repaying [secular] violence with holy violence.”<sup>6</sup> Pilate probably called Barabbas a terrorist.

But political power knows what to do with terrorists—they use them to prop up their own power. They’re useful in the political scheme to be held up as the reason you need your citizens to turn over all their power to you. Terrorists remind us of how scary the world is and how much we are willing to sacrifice our freedom for the illusion of security.

Barabbas is no threat to Pilate to release from prison. He knows how to stop a religious fanatic like Barabbas. But Jesus was no Barabbas. And neither Pilate nor the religious leaders knew how to stop Jesus. Tom Skinner, a preacher of a generation ago, wrote, “How do you stop a Man who has no guns, no tanks, no ammunition, but still is shaking the whole Roman empire? How do you stop a Man, who—without firing a shot—is getting revolutionary results?”<sup>7</sup>

And what we see beyond this morning’s story is that even execution cannot stop Jesus.

And that is the “no” of Christian faith. The austerity. Remember back in chapter 8 when Jesus said, “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”<sup>8</sup> It is the choice to live in a different way. To say “no” to the powers of the world that call for violence and vengeance. To say “no” to the powers of the world that tell us falling into step and getting into line is the way to live.

Saying “no” enables us to “embrace and prepare for a kind of death that the culture knows nothing about [and to] make room for the [life] of resurrection.”<sup>9</sup>

And here Mark’s gospel asks us for a response. Will we try to save our lives as the crowds, the religious leaders and Pilate do? And lose them? Or will we follow the way of Jesus and lose our life for the sake of the Gospel and live with a power that no one can stop or take away?

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<sup>6</sup> Tom Wright, *Mark for Everyone*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004, p209.

<sup>7</sup> Tom Skinner, *Words of Revolution: A Call to Involvement in the Real Revolution*, quoted in Blount and Charles, p253.

<sup>8</sup> Mark 8.35

<sup>9</sup> Peterson, p196.