

Jesus is put to death on the cross, they taunt, “Can’t you come down and save yourself?” And although Jesus does not stop his own death, in his power as the Son of God he brings about resurrected life and the tomb is left empty; the burial cloths are left behind.

Unlike Jesus’ first friends and followers, we didn’t get to see this with our own eyes. We have to imagine, and live into this hope based on faith. Kate Bowler says it well, “God is not done yet. When all we see is death and decay and destruction and disease, God sees hope, but not an empty optimism or empty phrase. God sees hard-won hope. Hope with feet. Hope that takes work.”²

We are nourished for that hope here at the table of Jesus Christ. Jesus, who spent so many dinners as the honored guest, at the homes of the rich and poor alike, has now become the host. And he will nourish us with his own body and blood, so that we are strengthened for the journey ahead. We can live into that resurrection hope because we are what we consume, we are what we eat: we can become more and more like Jesus as we partake in his very essence here at the table today. Grief and joy sit side by side. But we know we can feast extravagantly when given the opportunity, and that Jesus celebrates our fragile, vulnerable lives with us. Thanks be to God, Amen.



April 3, 2022

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Good Enough: “Feast Extravagantly”

Rev. Jasmine Smart

John 12:1-8

Last weekend, I helped officiate my first large, post-pandemic wedding that was similar to the weddings from the before-times.

This couple, Amanda and Jeff, had a wedding planned for March of 2020. And I’m sure you can guess what happened. They did have a beautiful, small, legal ceremony two years ago, with just them and their ten closest family members, getting married in a small chapel. Extended family got to see a video, but it wasn’t the same, of course. So as the pandemic raged on, the wedding got pushed, and then pushed again, until finally, two years later, Amanda and Jeff could have the big wedding of their dreams. One to two hundred of their closest friends and family gathered in the church to witness their vows.

From the officiant’s perspective, I wish all couples could get married this way, to be honest. There is something beautiful and intimate about having a service without having to worry about the big party you are planning; You are preparing for a marriage, not just a wedding day, anyway. So then, by the time Amanda and Jeff got to the altar two years later, they’ve been living this life together already. They have a beautiful baby girl. The normal nerves of: “Am I ready for this?” and “My life is going to completely change,” weren’t there. Instead, they got to appreciate their vows as a continuation. And then yes, they did get to party. We feasted together, at the rehearsal dinner with extended family, and then at the wedding reception with amazing food, an open bar, live music, and dancing. Some of the groom’s family had come all the way from South Africa to be present for this wedding. My pastor colleague who offered the prayer over dinner said, “I think this is what the feast of heaven looks like. They will come from east and west, north and south, to sit at table in the Kingdom of God...”

Today’s passage reminds me of that kind of feast. We have moved here in the fifth week of Lent to the gospel of John, and if you recall, Jesus’ first miracle takes place in this gospel when he transformed the water into wine

1 Kate Bowler. *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I’ve Loved*. Random House; Reprint Edition, 2018.

2 Kate Bowler, *Good Enough: 40ish Devotions for a Life of Imperfection*. Convergent Books, 2022, p. 222.

at a wedding feast in Cana. Here in chapter 12, we are in Bethany, about two miles east of Jerusalem, at the home of Jesus' dear friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

This is no ordinary dinner party. In the passage, it says it so simply we could easily gloss over it: this is the home of Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead, and is sitting at the table with him. As Christians, maybe this has become normal to us, but that is a big deal! The whole of John chapter 11 talks about this event, how Jesus is told that his friend Lazarus is ill, but he doesn't rush there right away, so by the time he gets there Lazarus has died, and Jesus weeps for his friend. Both sisters seem angry at Jesus, knowing he has the power to heal, and upset he didn't get there in time to save their brother. But instead, Jesus goes with them to the tomb, has the stone rolled away, and the sisters protest because Lazarus had been dead four days and they tell him there would be a stench by now. Jesus calls Lazarus out of the tomb, and he comes, still bound with the burial cloths, until Jesus invites the community to "unbind him and let him go."

I've always wondered about Lazarus in this story. He has just been one of the few who has passed from death back to life. How surreal would it be, then, to sit at a table and feast? Would it have been like one long sleep, or would he have things to tell them about life after death? And how fragile and precious would he find life now, since he knew how easily one can slip from this waking world and how vulnerable we are? How strange to be dead one day, and feasting with your closest friends and family the next! Not unlike the rehearsal dinner Amanda and Jeff celebrated, Lazarus' family now host a dinner party where they celebrate this miracle that has taken place, and bring out all the good food and wine to do so, so that the community can celebrate together this profound joy.

The inspiration for this sermon series, "Good Enough," comes from author Kate Bowler and her Lenten devotions of that name. Kate became one of my favorite contemporary writers a few years ago when I listened to the audio book, *Everything Happens for a Reason: And other Lies I've Loved*.¹

She reads the book herself, and in this personal memoir you hear about a young woman in her 30s who is diagnosed with stage four cancer. At the time, she was researching churches that celebrate the Prosperity Gospel, which often includes a lot of "If you pray for it, it will happen," mentality.

But no matter how hard she prayed, or others prayed for her, God wasn't healing her cancer. She was going to leave her young child motherless if she died prematurely. The platitudes people offered her were not enough. She wanted them to just be with her, and grieve with her. It is only due to the grace of God, and an experimental treatment, that she is still alive today,

and her work has changed to spearhead a movement of encouragement and leaning into our grief instead of avoiding it. Being able to hold grief and joy side by side is a skill that Bowler encourages us to practice.

Like Lazarus, I believe Kate Bowler knows the fragility and vulnerability of our lives isn't something to take for granted. And Jesus knows this too. This passage is here in the midst of Lent, right before we celebrate Palm Sunday, Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, next week. He knows his death is on the horizon, that his enemies are getting closer to putting him to death. And so, when his friend Mary, in gratitude for his gift of bringing her brother back to life, anoints his feet with the most expensive perfume she has in the house, this is a moment of intimacy and joy. It is almost as if with the overwhelming scent of the perfume that fills the whole house, they can cast the smell and worry of death away.

But Judas is already being cast as the villain here, being concerned about the cost of the perfume. This perfume was expensive, if it could have been sold for 300 denarii, a denarii was about one day's wage, so that's almost a year's worth of wages that have extravagantly been poured out on Jesus. But we're told Judas isn't really concerned about helping the poor, he just wants to line his own pockets. This was an act of extravagance Mary indulges in, but Jesus does not rebuke her. Just as Martha has prepared an extravagant meal for the group, so Mary wants to contribute and show her gratitude too. You notice Judas didn't complain about the cost of the extravagant meal he just enjoyed! Jesus tells them that Mary's anointing is preparing him for burial, just as they had anointed Lazarus with burial spices when they prepared his body for the tomb, and just as the women attempt to do after Jesus' crucifixion. Because Jesus was killed right before the Sabbath, they didn't have time to anoint him properly before he was placed in the tomb, so Mary's anointing is going to be the only preemptive preparation that is going to be done. Will the smell of this perfume, this love, encourage Jesus in the days to come, as he walks the difficult road in front of him?

I think Jesus' comments would have put a damper on this celebratory feast. Why did he have to turn this into a moment of preemptive grief? They were celebrating Lazarus' return to life, and yet Jesus tells them that he is going to die, and in fact, all of us are mortal. Even Lazarus is going to have to die again, and in the very next verses of this chapter in John, we are told that the authorities are plotting to put Lazarus to death along with Jesus because this miracle had only increased Jesus' movement of followers.

We don't know if they were successful in putting Lazarus to death. My guess is not, because something happened that no one expected. When