

Wonders and Implications, Questions and Puzzles *John 11:40-57*

This morning the gospel of John continues on a trajectory notably different than the course Matthew, Mark and Luke take toward the end of Jesus' ministry. For one thing, Leon Morris spends pages in his commentary, wondering why the raising of Lazarus, by far and away Jesus' most spectacular miracle, isn't even mentioned in the other gospels. He notes that John is full of stories about Jesus within the Jerusalem city limits, talking to Nicodemus by night, healing the paralytic on the Sabbath, holding forth on the temple porch, giving sight to a man born blind, while Matthew, Mark and Luke only have Jesus in the holy city for the week of his death.

Morris wonders if the other gospels aren't based on the memories of Peter, who is closely associated with Mark, who is thought to have written the first gospel. Morris notices that Peter disappears from all the gospels in the period just before holy week, only to reappear toward center stage on the night of the Last Supper, so Morris guesses that Peter may not have been there when Lazarus rose, so the other gospels center on miracles that Peter did see and could vouch for. Or next week, John will report that the authorities will plot to do away with Lazarus, so perhaps the earlier gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke avoid Lazarus' story so as not to put him or his family in further danger. I suppose scholars are entitled to their guesses.

Another feature of John's account is that he seems to have sources within the high priest's circle that allow him to record in detail events and conversations that the other gospels fail to record. In this week's passage, John records that *"the Jews who had come with Mary,"* an interesting turn of phrase that confirms what Jason Justinger observed two weeks ago, that while Martha ruled the household, it was Mary whose reach extended through the village and into the holy city, even perhaps into the halls of power. But the Jews who followed in Mary's wake to the tomb immediately divided into two parties.

John tells us, *"Many of the Jews who had come with Mary and seen what he did believed in him, but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done."* It makes sense that the people sitting Shiva with Martha and Mary would have been Pharisees, who shared Martha's conviction that faithful Israelites could expect to be raised *"in the resurrection on the last day."* Many of them would have seen Lazarus emerge from the cave to rejoin the living, and given Jesus a second look, opened their eyes and hearts to the notion that Jesus was more than the carpenter their rabbi's made him out to be.

But some of them would have seen it all as just more con-artistry, and John tells us that this bunch ran back to the Pharisees to warn them that more wild tales about Jesus were on the way. The Pharisees and the high priestly circle disagreed about most things, beginning with the resurrection, but the one fact they both understood is that Jesus and what he stood for would undermine everything that mattered to them, even when what mattered to them was at odds. Allow for a Messiah and the rabbi's would lose their synagogues and the priests would lose the temple: *"...everyone will believe in him,"* they said, *"and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation."*

But Caiaphas, the high priest, knew what to do with high minded carpenters. *"You know nothing at all!"* he said, *"Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish."* Whenever John heard these words from his informants, he took them right away, not as the musing of a jaded, old, manipulative operator in costume as a priest, but rather as the high priest God chose for this moment, something like Balaam in the book of Numbers, rotten to the core, but God used Caiaphas anyway to predict a bright future his own soul would never live to see.

John tells us: *"He didn't say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad."* This is a theme that runs in the back of peoples' minds throughout John's gospel. Way back in the previous Fall, during the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus had talked about going away, returning to the Father, and the rabbi's had wondered if he was going to leave old Israel and set up with the Greeks.

Later in the Fall, Jesus had taught about sheep and shepherds and talked about having flocks from other folds, and making different kinds of people *"one."* We'll hear more talk like that about Greeks and a world beyond the horizon in John's Palm Sunday account, but for now the whole business is a shot clean over the bow. All old Caiaphas can think about is keeping the temple under his thumb, the people under their rabbi's, and the Roman's in their barracks and off his streets.

"So from that day on," John tells us, *"they made plans to put him to death."* So Jesus didn't wait around in Bethany for the temple police to arrive. Rather, John tells us, *"...he no longer walked openly among the Jews, but went from there to a region near the desert, to a town called Ephraim, and there he stayed with the disciples."* The notoriety that grew from the miracle in Bethany appears to have ended Jesus' public ministry as it is told in John's gospel. The town John calls Ephraim is only called that by him, although scholars in the centuries since have guessed that it could be a place called Ophrah that appears in 2 Chronicles. If the scholars are guessing now, it's very likely the temple police were guessing as well back then.

So there Jesus stayed as winter turned to spring, preparing himself and preparing his disciples for that season when he would become *"the lamb of God"* for old Israel's Passover feast, just as the Baptist had promised some three years before.

Time flies when you don't have much time left, and soon John's gospel tells us that: "...the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and many went up from the countryside to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves." These early birds were likely associated with the authorities, the holiday shift of Levites and priests, there in time to complete the cleansing rituals and to set up early before all the fountains and sacred places were inundated with the holiday crowds. By this time, the raising of Lazarus and the estrangement between Jesus and official old Israel were common knowledge. The question that echoed through the temple square and on the temple porch was whether Jesus would dare show his face at the Passover at all.

Waiting in Ephraim for marching orders had to have been work for the men who had been with Jesus on the roller coaster in years since the Baptist had prophesied that it would be Jesus' blood splattered on the sides and top of the door. "*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world!*" the strange, desert prophet had said. In the years since, Jesus had done such wonderful things that his friends could scarcely understand what John could have meant. But one woman seemed to know, Mary, the sister of Lazarus in Bethany, she seemed to know what saving her brother and the rest of us might cost Jesus. And we'll hear her story next week.

Mid-Week Devotional

Martha and Mary

But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about so many things, but one thing is necessary, Mary has chosen the good portion that will not be taken from her."

Luke 10:41,42

We learn from John's gospel that Martha and Mary had a home in the village of Bethany, not too far from Jerusalem, and they had a brother named Lazarus who will become famous and infamous when Jesus raises him from the grave some four days after Lazarus was buried. So there's lots of drama in Jesus' relationship with Martha and Mary, but the incident recorded here in Luke 10 was before all that, probably early on as the sisters are learning about Jesus and what he stands for. Our story opens with Martha making the world go round. Jesus needs a place to stay so Martha takes him and his traveling band in. They all need something to eat so Martha takes her position in the kitchen and begins to make things happen, good things. Supper begins to cook on the fire and the plates start to find their place on the table and meanwhile Jesus is holding forth in the living room and...

As she hurries back and forth, Martha hears snitches and snatches of wonderful talk, the sort of talk that makes the world make sense and life worth living but Martha can't stop. Because the meat will burn and the bread will dry and the vegetables will stay unwashed and uncut and as she dries her hands and reaches for the knife Martha catches a glimpse through the doorway of Mary her sister, sitting at Jesus feet, soaking in his words, her eyes agleam with hope and joy. And all of a sudden, it dawns on Martha why she's so busy. "That dead beat sister of mine is sitting at the feet of Jesus while I have to stand and do all the work."

The Greek text tells us that when Martha went over to where Mary was, she literally stood over her while she complained to Jesus. "What kind of guest are you? Don't you care that my sister has left me alone to do all the serving?" My guess is that any other rabbi in the world would have said, "Come on, Mary, give your sister a hand!" That's what I would have said if I were teaching in Martha's living room, sleeping that night at Martha's house. But I guess Jesus didn't have any sense of fairness because he didn't shame Mary into helping her sister, instead he scolds Martha for making his dinner.

"Martha, Martha," he says, "*you are anxious and troubled about so many things but only one is necessary...*". Truth be told, I think Jesus wants his dinner. I think Jesus knows Martha has to be in the kitchen. He's not scolding her for doing her job although its likely that Martha heard it that way. He's not scolding her at all. There's a gentleness in the repetition of her name. There's concern in Jesus' words about the burden Martha has taken on, "*You are worried and troubled about so many things...*". Often we get busy and the problem isn't so much the number of our tasks and the weight of our work but that it all becomes ours.

In our own minds, the world begins to rotate around us and pretty soon all we can see is what's out of balance, what's wrong and what's short and who's to blame. And we think that some nudge, some shove on our part is going to bring the whole thing back under control and the problem is that it won't. Shove the world and the world will shove back. Try to tell your sister who's boss and the rabbi dinner guest will tell you you're wrong and declare your sister a saint right in front of your very eyes. I'm really hoping Jesus said thank you when some food hit his plate that night. And I'm going to guess he did!

Because again, I don't think Jesus' is trying to teach Martha that service is bad. I think he's trying to teach Martha that her service that night allowed Mary to learn things that they both were going to need in the months and years to come. So the point is that service sets the stage for something much more important. Mary never did have much of a sense of proportion when it came to Jesus. John's gospel tells us that some two thousand years ago this weekend Mary blew it again. She took a bottle of perfume worth a year's pay and emptied out on Jesus feet. Every time she got around Jesus she lost all track of what things were worth. But again, amazingly, Jesus comes to her defense. Just as Martha had to hear that what Mary had chosen was better than dinner, now the disciples will have to hear that Mary's devotion was worth more than their idealistic charity.