

Text – John 12:1-8
Corpse?”

Theme: “Anointing: King, or

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today’s Gospel account is often called “The Anointing at Bethany,” though that title hardly captures the significance of the event, at least in John’s telling of the story of Jesus Christ.

Yes, Mary, the sister of Lazarus, anoints Jesus here in a heartfelt act of deep devotion, and I’ll say more about that in a moment, but Judas the betrayer offers his opinion about this immediately: it’s a frivolous waste of a lot of money that could have been given to the poor.

Coming at this anointing from Judas’ perspective, we might ask, “What was Mary thinking?” A full pound of costly perfume made of pure nard? Why the value of such a gift was immense: three hundred denarii! This would be the near equivalent to a year’s wages for a laborer! Just imagine what that could do to help the poor!

Now nobody cared more about the poor than Jesus, but Jesus comes to Mary’s defense, and Gospel-writer John uses Judas’ critical remark as a platform to comment on Judas’ character and conduct, telling us that he was a thief who pilfered money from the disciples’ common purse.

And this, of course, now sets the scene for Judas’ kiss of betrayal of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane – but that’s getting way ahead of the story. What this text brings before us as a topic is this whole matter of anointing – and an exploration into that takes us back a long way to well before the time of Jesus.

Before we go there, we should say that anointing is “smearing or pouring oil or ointment on the head or body of a person, or on an object.” That’s a good, basic definition.

It’s what Mary, the sister of Lazarus, does to Jesus in our Gospel text, and it may well be that she does so out of her deep appreciation for Jesus having raised her brother to life.

In general, an anointing is a sacred rite in which fragrant oil is applied, and by which an object or person is consecrated for religious service and purpose. As I alluded earlier, anointing was an ancient practice in the Near East, even going back to before the Exodus of the Jews from their slavery and bondage in Egypt!

How do we know this? Well, between about 1910 and the start of World War II, there were extensive British and German archeological excavations at an Egyptian site called Tell el-Amarna, which is located about two hundred miles south of Cairo on the eastern bank of the Nile River.

We now know that Tell el-Amarna is the site of Akhenaton, which was the capital of Egypt during the reign of Pharaoh Amen-hotep IV, who ruled the Egyptian Empire between 1375 and 1366 B.C.

These names may all sound strange and unfamiliar to you, but you may recognize the name of the wife of Pharaoh Amen-hotep IV: yes, he married his sister (such in-breeding was common among the royalty of Egypt in this period), and together they had six daughters, and the name of this royal wife and mother was Queen Nefert-iti.

If that name doesn't ring a bell, then perhaps you have heard of Nefert-iti's half-brother, Tutankhaton. He became Pharaoh after Amen-hotep IV, and he's more commonly known by his abbreviated name, King "Tut."

Among the most valuable of the discoveries at Tell el-Amarna is a collection of diplomatic letters, more than three hundred of them, called the "Amarna Tablets."

Even today, many Bible scholars affirm that these cuneiform Babylonian clay tablets rank first among archeological finds bearing on the history of Bible lands in the latter half of the second millennium B. C.

And among the Amarna Tablets is one letter reporting the anointing of a Syro-Palestinian king in the fourteenth century B. C.

If you're not an "Indiana Jones" type, if you don't care much about history and archeology, you're likely wondering now if it was really necessary for me to give all this background information about anointing.

Well, to be honest, there's a lot about anointing also in our own Old Testament, so I guess I really didn't have to go all the way back to ancient Egypt – but I personally love all this Bible history stuff!

But, yes, you can read about the anointing of Kings Saul and David in 1 Samuel (10:1; 16:3). And you can read about the anointing of King Solomon in 1 Kings (1:39).

Other kings whose anointing is recorded in the Old Testament include Jehu and Joash, Absalom and Jehoahaz. All this should tell us that an anointing was a significant event, and it should tell us that those who were anointed were important people.

When kings were anointed, the implication was that the king was becoming God's anointed, God's chosen. Upon anointment, the king became an agent of God ruling over the people as God's appointed and holy servant. It's worth pointing out that the Hebrew word for anointed is *māshîah*, which we know as "Messiah," and which when translated into Greek is *Christos*, or for us, "Christ."

Now the story of the anointing of Jesus at Bethany looks like a whole lot more than just a friend's loyal devotion using expensive perfume!

In John's Gospel, this event is strategically placed – it immediately precedes Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and the beginning of Holy Week – and that's our story next Sunday.

Gospel-writer John uses this story of Jesus' anointing as a platform to foreshadow the announcement of Jesus' identity even before the events of Holy Week unfold and verify the claims which Christ in His ministry had already made for himself.

John says Mary, the sister of Lazarus, anointed Jesus. John says this “anointed one” is the Messiah, the Christ, the desperately-needed, long-awaited anointed One of God!

Yet one more thing needs to be said about the use of oil, ointment, or perfume in the rite and practice of anointing. As you have already heard, such a practice often announces that a very important person, someone like a king, is the recognized and acclaimed agent of God.

An anointing often takes place at a coronation, at the ceremony whereby a monarch is crowned and given the power to rule.

But there is also another occasion for anointing, and it is named by Jesus in this Gospel text today when He says that Mary bought the costly perfume “so that she might keep it for the day of my burial” (John 12:7). This is clearly a foretelling of that which is to come!

We would likely conclude that there are not two more different events than a joyous coronation and a sad, mournful death – except in the case of Jesus Christ. For Jesus was indeed a king, albeit not an earthly one, for he said, “My kingdom is not from this world” (John 18:36).

Yes, Jesus sought and seeks now to rule, though not over an earthly realm. The dominion which Christ desires is in the hearts of fervent and faithful believers – in the hearts of people like you and me.

Jesus did not seek to be raised up to a plush, gilded, high seat of worldly power; the throne of his choosing is the rough, torturous cross of redemption and salvation! Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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