

Six Days Before the Passover  
John 12:1-8  
Preached April 6, 2025

The time is getting short. My calendar keeps haunting me. The notifications keep disturbing me. It started before Ash Wednesday; when and how will we keep Holy Week. It echoed through March; do you have your services arranged, your music selected, your readers prepared? Then this week, a strange notification hit me like a brick. Passover is this Saturday. Today, this day, it is six days before the Passover.

That is exactly how the twelfth chapter of John begins, “*Six days before the Passover,*” six days and Jesus arrives at Bethany. Bethany - a little village located just over the hill from Jerusalem. A hill called the Mount of Olives. When you climb the road of Bethany, finally arriving at the crest of the Mount of Olives, your eyes are greeted with a panoramic view of the city of Jerusalem. It is a very impressive and beautiful sight! Then the path winds down the other side, past an ancient olive garden called the Garden of Gethsemane, and through the Kidron Valley, running along the eastern wall of the Holy City, and up to a gate in the eastern wall. This is the Golden Gate through which legend has it the Messiah will come to Jerusalem.

This is the gate Jesus will pass through as he enters the city at the start of Holy Week, when, to shouts of “*Hosanna!*,” he mounts a donkey and rides up that hill from Bethany, and down the other side of the Mount of Olives, and past the Garden of Gethsemane, and through the Kidron Valley, riding along the eastern wall of Jerusalem to the Golden Gate.

“Six days before the Passover.” The end of his life is in sight. The authorities are plotting to kill him. He spends supper that night in the home of his friends Lazarus and Martha and Mary. There Jesus prepares the disciples and his friends for what will soon happen. How do the disciples respond to Jesus’ words? All the Gospel writers say the same. They do not understand. They don’t WANT to understand. They are in denial. They think they are going to go to Jerusalem to start the uprising that will take back the city from the Romans. After all, that’s what the Messiah is expected to do! The Messiah is the conquering hero who breaks the back of Israel’s oppressors and sets the people free! But here is Jesus, and he is talking about dying. And all the while Jesus is talking about dying, they are thinking about the upcoming revolution, and what roles they will play in the new administration.

Six days before the Passover. And that’s when it happens. While all the men are debating the meaning of the moment that has come upon them while they plan and organize and gear up for the battle...Mary quietly steals away to her room. When she returns, she is carefully holding an alabaster jar containing pure nard – spikenard- a very, very expensive perfume. She goes to where Jesus is reclining at table. She kneels. She opens the jar. She pours out the perfume over Jesus’ feet – all 300-denarii-worth – the equivalent of a year’s wages.

The fragrance fills the house. Mary uncovers her head and wipes Jesus' feet with her hair. An intimate, passionate gesture. And then... Judas speaks. "What a waste! This perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor!"

Six days before the Passover And only Mary perceives it, and acts. She knows the tensions in Jerusalem. She has listened carefully to Jesus' words. She sees the strain on his face, the hunch of his shoulders. She is nearly brought to tears.

Six days before the Passover. She looks around at these men – steady Andrew and impetuous Peter, James and John, the sons of thunder, even arrogant and weaselly Judas. And then her eyes fall on her brother, Lazarus, a man who, just a few weeks before, had been raised from death by Jesus himself. And then... she smiles. She knows. Jesus sees the transformation. And then he says "Leave her alone, so that she might keep it for the day of my burial."

Six days before the Passover. And the gospel is enacted, not by the Man of Galilee, but by a woman of Bethany- acting as a prophet, even if she was not fully aware. Anointing Jesus with oil. Anointing the dead for burial. Anointing a King for his throne. Jesus, the Anointed One of God.

Six days before the Passover. And an act of faith and praise and hope fill the room with fragrant perfume. An act of extravagant love, pouring out a costly gift that knew no bounds. An act of passion and grace that stuns others with its extravagance and power. You might even say it was folly. But sometimes when you really love someone you just can't do enough for them. You are willing to risk it all, the cost, the humility, the shame.

Six days before the Passover. And soon Jesus himself would bend down and wash the feet of his disciples. Soon Jesus would be stripped. Soon Jesus would be mocked. Soon Jesus would break open his body and pour out his precious blood for us. Soon Jesus would take the greatest treasure he owned, his own life, and in a wildly extravagant and foolish act give it as a costly gift that knew no bounds. Simply because he loves us - so fully and so deeply and so completely. A reckless waste or an extravagant, impassioned act of love?

Six days before the Passover. Holy Week is coming. Can you smell the sweet fragrance of God's passionate love for you? Amen.

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