

## Preparing For Easter

We are entering the last two weeks before Good Friday and Easter, the days we reflect on and remember his suffering, his death and his resurrection. Next Sunday is the day the church refers to as Palm Sunday when we remember Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem and the beginning of what is referred to as Holy Week.

There are always preparations for Easter. Some of you are helping prepare for the Easter Egg hunt at church, stuffing Easter eggs. Some of you are preparing by shopping for new clothes for the children or a new outfit for yourself to wear on Easter Sunday morning. But the season of Lent, the forty days prior to Easter is supposed to be a time of spiritual preparation, a time of repentance and soul-searching, a time of putting aside some things, quieting our heart in order to hear from the Lord. It is a time of preparing by placing ourselves into the story, to think and remember and reflect on all that was occurring in the life of Jesus over these last couple of weeks and these final days. I invite you over the next two weeks to prepare for Easter by trying to think of how Jesus must have been feeling, what was he feeling, what was he thinking as he made his way into Jerusalem and toward the cross.

There is a poignant scene to me, found in Matthew 24. Jesus has come to Jerusalem and been staying outside of the city with friends in Bethany. The bible simply says "**As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately.**" **Matthew 24:3** It is just a moment captured in time, Jesus sitting alone on the Mount of Olives. From that vantage point he can look out over the entire city of Jerusalem. From the Mount of Olives he can see down on the temple mount where the sacrifices are being made. He can look beyond the temple, beyond the city walls to the rock quarry where Golgotha was located, the Roman place of execution. He could see the place where heaven's perfect lamb would die. The place of his own crucifixion. What was he thinking? Thinking of the pain, the process of betrayal and beating that lay ahead?

I just imagine him trying to prepare his heart and mind for the most brutal death imaginable. But of course, Jesus had been planning and preparing for this day from the beginning. In John 12 Jesus said, predicting his death, "**Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour.**" **John 12:27**. In Matthew 20 Jesus said, "**The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.**" **Matthew 20:28** Jesus knew this was

the reason he had come into the world, the reason he had been born. He was the Lamb of God, the perfect sinless sacrifice and by his death He would take away the sins of the world.

Jesus had talked about it in cryptic references (“unless a grain of wheat fall into the ground and die...if I be lifted up will draw all men to myself”) but now, privately to his disciples, Jesus was speaking openly and with growing detail about what was to happen. After Peter’s confession that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, Matthew tells us, **“From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.” Matthew 16:21** With increasing detail Jesus told them, **“We are going up to Jerusalem and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!” Matthew 20:18**

Now they are in Jerusalem. Jesus has been teaching in the temple courts and staying in Bethany when it all comes to a head. We hear him say, **“As you know, the Passover is two days away – and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.” Matthew 26:2** “Two days from now what I’ve been telling you about is going to happen.” Jesus knew. James Boice wrote, “In all human history, no events have ever been of greater significance or more specifically prophesied than these. This drama is the turning point of history, the very center of Christianity.” Jesus was preparing himself and his disciples for his death, but strangely, he wasn’t the only one. There were others preparing for his death. Turn to Matthew 26.

The bible says, **“Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him. ‘But not during the Feast’, they said, ‘or there may be a riot among the people.’” Matthew 26:3-5**

Caiaphas and members of the Sanhedrin, the ruling religious body of the Jews, met to plot and plan the death of Jesus. They saw him as a political and religious threat. Remember they had tried to catch him in a misstatement but never could. John 7 tells of the chief priests trying to catch him in something and the guards they sent to arrest Jesus said, “No one ever spoke the way this man does.” They couldn’t catch him.

After Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, that miracle pushed Caiaphas and the leaders over the edge. Jesus' popularity among the people was accelerating. They thought "if Jesus is increasingly viewed by the Jewish populace as a prophet, a miracle worker, what was to keep them from deciding he was the Messiah and trying to make him King? Then the Romans would come down on us with military force to quell what would be viewed as an attempted coup." John tells us one of the leaders said, **"If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." John 11:48.** Caiaphas and the other Jewish leaders would be stripped of their power, position and wealth. It was Caiaphas the high priest who spoke up and said, **"...it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish." John 11:50.**

Afraid to kill him during the Passover feast because it might incite the crowd of supporters, the Sanhedrin and Caiaphas decide to wait until after, but they begin planning and preparing for his death.

There is another person preparing for his death, although in a totally different way and with a different spirit. At some point during these final days, Jesus is having dinner in Bethany at the home of a man known as Simon the Leper. During the meal Matthew tells us in 26:7, a woman came to Jesus with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table. Matthew doesn't give us the woman's name, but John tells us it was Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. John says she not only poured it on his head, but also on his feet and then knelt and dried his feet with her hair. It seems awkward or strange to us but it was an extravagant expression of love and devotion in their culture.

The disciples were upset, arguing that the perfume was so expensive it could have been sold and the money given to help the poor. John indicates in his gospel (John 12:4) that the disciple actually raising the objection was Judas and that his motive was not concern for the poor but rather because Judas was a thief and had been stealing money out of the expense account.

When they complained, Jesus defended Mary, saying essentially she alone recognized that Jesus was going to give his life as a sacrifice on the cross. Jesus said, **"When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. I tell you that wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her." Matthew 26:12-13**

Mary had been saving this perfume for some time. Apparently she decided to use it to anoint his body before his death. She alone, of all of them, understood what Jesus had been saying. How? How did Mary perceive what others including his disciples had failed to understand? Perhaps it had to do with where we always find Mary in the biblical account. Again and again we find her sitting at the feet of Jesus, listening, studying, learning. Luke spoke of Martha's sister **Mary, "who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said."** **Luke 10:39** Jesus told Martha when she complained about Mary sitting while Martha worked, **"Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken away from her."** **Luke 10:42** Indeed.

Now we see Mary again at the feet of Jesus. This time she is worshiping, wiping his feet with her hair, an act of devotion, contrition, adoration. It was extravagant, but that was the kind of love and devotion she felt toward the Lord because she understood, he is going to die and perhaps more than the others she knew, he is going to die for me and in my place. Mary was preparing for his death. But there was another.

Look again at the text in Matthew 26. **"Then one of the Twelve – the one called Judas Iscariot – went to the chief priests and asked, 'What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?' So they counted out for him thirty silver coins. From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over."** **Matthew 26:14-16**

Remember that in those earlier passages where Jesus was telling his disciples what would happen, he used the word betrayal. The Son of Man will be betrayed into the hands of the chief priest and then to the Romans. Even if they could understand his arrest I can't imagine any of the disciples expected it would be one of them, one of the twelve that would betray him. How could one of them sell him out like that? I can't imagine the darkness that must have filled Judas' mind and soul when he made this choice to betray the Son of God for money! How cold and calculating this sounds. "What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?" I would want to ask Judas, "what is the value of your soul, your eternal destiny? What's your price?" I've often said, "If you can be bought, the devil will come up with the price."

Jesus once asked the question, **"What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?"** **Matthew 16:26** Judas, what's the price for your soul? Thirty silver coins. That's not much for an eternal soul. What's your price? What's the price for you to sell your relationship to Jesus, to walk away from him? Is it money? Sex? Fame? Power? Are you asking, "what will the devil or the

world give me if I hand Jesus over to you and walk away?” I see people do it all the time. Raised in the church, but they sell Jesus out for 30 silver coins and a few minutes of fame. What’s your price?

Judas was with Jesus, just like the other disciples, but somehow he never understood. He never really knew him. It’s possible to sit in church Sunday after Sunday, tolerating the service, or maybe really enjoying it, appreciating the music and the sermon, enjoying the company, but never really know Jesus, never really be born again. It’s time for you to know Jesus. Come to him in faith, repent and ask him to forgive your sins and be your Savior and the Lord of your life. You can know him and experience him. Today!

Jesus was preparing for his death. So was the Chief Priest and the Sanhedrin, so was Mary and so was Judas. But there was one more that was planning for Jesus’ death. It may sound shocking but that was the Heavenly Father. He had been planning since before the foundation of the world. John, in the book of Revelation speaks of Jesus, the Lamb of God as **“...the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world.” Revelation 13:8** This was no accident. This was the plan. Peter in his sermon on the day of Pentecost spoke of Jesus when he said **“This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.” Acts 2:23**

This was no accident. It was no coincidence that Jesus would die on Passover. As lambs were being offered on the temple mount, Jesus, whom John the Baptist described as the “lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world”, would die on the cross of Calvary, dying indeed for our sins and the sins of the whole world. All of this happened by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge. God planned it. Ordained it. The chief priest was going to wait till after the Passover, but the plans got pushed up. How? Why? Ultimately the writer of Proverbs explains it for us, **“Many are the plans in a man’s heart, but it is the Lord’s purpose that prevails. Proverbs 19:21.** Men can plot and scheme, but God is going to carry out his purpose and plans. This was God’s plan of redemption.

Go back to that scene in Matthew 24. Jesus looking out over the city from the Mount of Olives and then look at his words just prior in Matthew 23:37. **“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.” Matthew 23:37** Jesus wanted to save them, to bring them home to the Father, but they were not

willing. He had come to announce the kingdom of heaven to them, to bring them hope and eternal life, but they rejected him. All of this is because the Father and the Son loved them and loved this world. Jesus said it so plainly, **“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” John 3:16-17**

All the plans and all the preparation are pieces in this great plan of redemption. All of it comes together at the cross in order to secure salvation for you and for me, to extend to us the offer of forgiveness of our sins and eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ.

Jesus was preparing for his death. So was Judas, and Mary, and Caiaphas. But you know what? We are all facing death and we all need to do some preparing. Although Jesus knew his death was coming in two days we don't know when our time will come. Judas died before Jesus did in an act of remorse and regret. We don't know when, the bible just tells us it is appointed unto men and women once to die and after that, the judgement. We had better be prepared. We are going to stand before God someday. Wouldn't you like to have your sins forgiven and know that you already have the promise of heaven and eternal life? Wouldn't you like to know what it's like to have your sins washed away, the guilt removed, to have peace in your mind and in your heart? You can. Through his death on the cross, Jesus has made a way for you to have a brand new life. What do you need to do? The bible says to confess your sins and believe upon Jesus to forgive you and he will cleanse you from sin. Ask him to come into your heart and life and he will do it. The choice is yours. Make it while there is still time and opportunity!

I'll be honest with you. I'm talking about a commitment of your life to Christ. It comes with demands and cost. He says to come and take up a cross and follow me. I'm talking about surrendering your life to him. But I'm also talking about a personal relationship with the God of the universe, that you can walk with him and talk to him and His Holy Spirit will come to live inside of you! I'm talking about a peace that passes understanding and being able to rest in him and cast your cares upon him. It is indeed a new life. Are you ready to surrender your life to him? It's time to do more than just prepare for Easter. It's time to prepare for eternity! God is giving you that opportunity today. Trust Him and turn to Him in faith!