

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Trustworthy

'Tis the Set of the Sail

(John 12:1-19)

Study #8

Introduction: Lessons in sailing...in life...

When our children were young and growing, our house seemed to be getting smaller. So, we traded in a couch that didn't fit anymore for a Sunfish sailboat.

It was in that boat that I learned the rudiments of sailing on Medina Lake, back when Medina held water.

Our Sunfish was a one-person yacht. But with small-ish kids, it often held me + one - or even two - as I took them along to learn how to sail, together. (It turns out that capsizing helps fathers and kids bond. Who knew...)

I learned most of what I learned about sailing by the hard road of trial and mostly error.

One thing I did learn was that I could travel in any direction I wanted to go on the high seas of Medina Lake, no matter which way the winds were blowing.

If the wind was blowing toward my intended destination, I would let out the sail and "run" with the wind.

If the wind was blowing against me, I could still make it to my destination by setting the sail so as to allow "tacking" back and forth into the wind.

The lesson was that the sailboat's direction was determined, not by the winds, but by "*the set of the sail.*" If I set the sail correctly, I could make the boat go wherever I wanted it to go.¹

So, for sailing; so, for life.

As we look into John's Gospel today, we'll see a variety of people encounter Jesus and the winds He brought with Him.

And, as in sailing, the direction these people took in response to Jesus' winds was directly tied to their posture toward Jesus. It was the set of the sail of their soul that made the difference.

Today's look at three scenes late in Jesus' life helps us set the sails of our souls to meet Jesus' winds and go where He wants us to go.

The turn to the final chapter... (11:45-57)

After Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, we aren't surprised to read, **[John 11:45] Therefore many of the Jews who came to Mary, and saw what He had done, believed in Him.**

The raising of Lazarus was a "**sign**" that shouted, "**Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.**" (John 20:31) Of course they believed. That was the whole point of the "**sign.**"

We're also not surprised that not everyone believed in Him. Others "set their sails" differently and received the news of Lazarus' resurrection as an invitation to reject.

John wrote that some went straight from the tomb to tell the Pharisees what Jesus had done, intending to bring Jesus down.

¹ That's the point of a poem written by Ella Wheeler Wilcox, "The Winds of Fate."

One ship sails East,	'Tis the set of the sails
And another West,	And not the gales,
By the self-same winds that blow	That tells the way we go.

Their tattle-taling had its intended effect. The Pharisees convened a meeting of the Sanhedrin to discuss the predicament Jesus had created for them.

Their concern was that if Jesus continued with all of these “*signs*,” everyone would believe in Him, there would be a massive revolt, **[48]...“and the Romans will come and take over both our place and our nation.”**

That’s when Caiaphas, the high priest, proposed a solution.

To those who feared the danger Jesus presented, he said, **[49]...“You know nothing at all, [50] nor are you taking into account that it is in your best interest that one man die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish instead.”**

Caiaphas’ plan to protect the nation was to deal with Jesus by doing away with Jesus. And John explained that Caiaphas was inadvertently more right than he knew.

[51] Now he did not say this on his own, but as he was high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation; [52] and not for the nation only, but in order that He might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.

Caiaphas’ thinking was way too small.

Jesus would die for the sins of the whole world, not just Israel. God would make out of all of those who believed in Him one big flock.

But, with Caiaphas’ prophecy, things changed. It was from this point forward that there was no longer only quiet murmurings in the background about wishing Jesus was gone.

No, **[53]...from that day on they planned together to kill Him.**

That’s dark. And, as for Jesus and His disciples, they went away to an out-of-the-way place where Jesus took His final retreat with His disciples. (11:54)

But back in Jerusalem, the Jewish rulers were on the lookout for Jesus. Jerusalem was on high alert.

[57] Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where He was, he was to report it, so that they might arrest Him.

The first of three scenes involving Jesus we’ll see today takes us to the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, in the town of Bethany.

Extravagant Worship in Bethany (12:1-8)

THE SETTING: A Banquet for Jesus (12:1-2)

[12:1] Therefore, six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. [2] So they made Him a dinner there, and Martha was serving; and Lazarus was one of those reclining at the table with Him.²

Passover was and still is one of the three great feasts on the Jewish calendar. Passover celebrates the deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage in the days of Moses.³

I assume that the dinner held at Lazarus’ house was served in honor of Jesus, since He had only recently raised Lazarus from the dead. Think of this as a “*Thank You*” banquet held in Jesus’ honor.

² John writes (19:31) that Passover landed on a Sabbath on that year. That means that Jesus’ time at Lazarus’ home was held on a Saturday afternoon of the week before His death.

³ The Passover observance included a special meal served by every Jewish family. The main course of that meal was lamb. On that first Passover during Moses’ time,

the lambs were sacrificed, and their blood was sprinkled on the door posts of each home. The blood was a sign to keep the death angel from destroying their first-born son, as he destroyed the first-born male child in each Egyptian home. The Jews understood that the blood of the lamb protected them from the wrath of God.

At this meal would have been at least Mary, Martha, Lazarus, Jesus, and the twelve apostles. Maybe others.

We aren't surprised to see Martha serving. What Mary did took center stage.

Mary Anointed Jesus (12:3)⁴

So, from some source, Mary had access to some very expensive perfume called *nard* (or *spikenard*).

This fragrance was made from a plant that grows in the foothills of the Himalayan mountains. For long distance transport, large quantities were sealed in alabaster jars.

Nard has an intense, warm, musky fragrance. In ancient times, people would say that nard had about it the fragrance of the Garden of Eden. Nard was hard to come by and was very expensive.

[3] Mary then took a pound of very expensive perfume of pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped His feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

Mary's act was over-the-top. It was extravagant.

We see its extravagance in the kind and the amount of the perfume Mary used - a pound would have been overpowering even in a large hall. We see it in the towel Mary used - her hair. And we see extravagance in what she anointed - not Jesus' head, but His feet.

Every aspect of this anointing shouts Mary's recognition that Jesus was worthy of her whole-hearted worship.

In those days and in that culture, a woman would never let her hair down in public. Mary was so overwhelmed with devotion for Jesus that she couldn't have cared less about propriety.

We call her act *extravagant. Costly. Sacrificial*. And we find examples of sacrificial, costly acts of worship all over the Bible.⁵

- David's exuberant dancing before the Lord when the ark of the covenant came into Jerusalem was costly in terms of his reputation.
- The countless thousands of animals offered to God at the dedication of Solomon's Temple was sacrificial.

Mary's act was one in a long line of acts of extravagant acts of worship God's people have offered throughout history.

And we applaud her sacrificial worship as we applaud the sacrifice of others who, throughout biblical history and even to this day, worship God at great expense. Mary is positively heroic here.

But not everyone in that room was applauding. One man had a scowl on his face. One man considered Mary's anointing of Jesus to be a waste.

What's funny is that as we listen to this man's objection, we think, "*You know, he's got a point.*"

Judas Took Exception (12:4-6)

What an honorable guy! (vv. 4-5)

[4] But Judas Iscariot, one of His disciples, the one who intended to betray Him, said, [5] "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the proceeds given to poor people?"⁶

⁴ Luke records a separate anointing of Jesus by a sinful woman in the home of Simon the Pharisee, presumably in the region of Galilee. (Luke 7)

⁵ See 2 Samuel 24:18-25 for a wonderful statement from King David. He will not offer to God a burnt offering to God which cost him nothing, but will buy the

threshing floor on which the sacrifice will be made from a man named Araunah. David understood that God delights in our giving to Him offerings that are, in our currency, costly.

⁶ The dual reference to Judas as "disciple" and "betrayer" is intentional and telling.

Three hundred denarii amounted to about what a working man earned over the course of a full year. The proceeds of the sale of all that perfume could have fed a lot of families for a long time.

After making that comment, Judas comes out smelling better than Mary's spikenard.

It looks like Judas was the only compassionate one in the room, that he was the only one who really cared for the poor, that he was more Christian than Jesus.

But...all was not as it seemed as John gives us Judas' backstory.

What hidden motives! (v. 6)

[6] Now he said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and as he kept the money box, he used to steal from what was put into it.

I have always found it fascinating that Judas was trusted by the other apostles to such an extent that he was appointed treasurer.

He fooled them all. Judas had been consistently skimming off the top to fill his own pockets.⁷

He wasn't concerned for the poor. He smelled the perfume filling the house and saw shekels escaping his pockets.

Then Jesus spoke. Jesus knew Judas' backstory and his motives.

Jesus - on the Priority of Sacrificial Worship (12:7-8)

[7] Therefore Jesus said, "Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of My burial."⁸

The cross looms large and near. Jesus invests Mary's anointing with a depth of meaning she could not have known.

[8] "For you always have the poor with you, but you do not always have Me."

Jesus was not robbing the poor by accepting this act of worship. There would always be opportunity to help those in need. And Jesus was on record as being a great Friend to the poor.

Here's Jesus' point: When a golden opportunity for extravagant worship presents itself, throw caution to the wind, pull out all the stops and go for it. That's what Mary did and we honor her for it.

Now, hold the two images of Mary and Judas side by side.

She loved Jesus with her whole heart. She trusted Him as Savior and worshipped Him for the Lord He was.

And Judas?

Just like the other disciples, Judas had watched Jesus perform countless miracles over the past three years.

He had followed Jesus for three years and knew Him as well as anyone. He had the respect and trust of his fellow disciples, who appointed him treasurer.

But he had never internalized the truth about Jesus. He never took Christ's message to heart. He never believed in Him.

And when Judas finally realized that Jesus would not profit him - financially speaking - he rejected Jesus - spiritually speaking.

However he may have been leaning prior to this event, it seems to me that this event pushed Judas over the edge. Because of the set of his soul's sail, this wind pushed him into rejection and betrayal.

For a look at the next story, we stay at Lazarus' house and watch a crowd of people milling around outside.

⁷ I assume that the other disciples only found out about Judas' thievery after the fact - i.e., after His death.

⁸ Here, and not for the last time in this chapter, Jesus alluded to His soon-to-come death on the cross.

Looking for Jesus and... "Look, there's Lazarus!" (12:9-11)

Friendly Crowds Investigate - and See Lazarus (12:9)

[9] The large crowd of the Jews then learned that He was there; and they came, not on account of Jesus only, but so that they might also see Lazarus, whom He raised from the dead.

We can all understand the draw. I'd want to see the guy who was raised from the dead, too.

It's not every day that you get to see someone who had been dead for four days, now alive and kicking.

So, the crowds came to the home of Lazarus to see the walking, breathing miracle with their own eyes. They came to investigate.

They were open and receptive and got the confirmation they needed that the rumors were all true.

That would have been one excited crowd.

But (as we saw earlier with the crowd at the tomb), the crowd here was not monolithically friendly.

Unfriendlies in the Crowd Plan the Unthinkable (vv. 10-11)

[10] But the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death also, [11] because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and were believing in Jesus.

Of all the scenes highlighting the religious rulers' antagonism against Jesus, this may be the saddest.

They saw the raised-from-the-dead Lazarus and were putting together plans for Lazarus to die, yet a second time. Unconscionable.

They were prepared to do anything to keep people from believing in Jesus. They have already put out a contract on Jesus. Now, they've done the same with Lazarus.

Nobody in Bethany was doubting that a miracle had occurred. It was as uncontested as the parting of the Red Sea.

And some people came to see Lazarus, filled with hope and openness, ready to believe.

Others came to see what action they needed to take to do away with evidence of Jesus' claims to be "***the Christ, the Son of God.***"

Just like we did with the images of Mary and Judas, we hold these two groups up, side by side, for examination.

There are two groups of people arriving at the same home, and being exposed to the same reality - Lazarus is alive! - coming to wildly disparate conclusions about what to do with that data.

The difference was the set of the souls' sails. Inclined toward openness and receptivity, some caught the wind and sailed straight into faith.

Others, open only to what kept the status quo and their power intact, allowed the wind to push them away.

We keep those images in mind as we turn to the final scene for today. This scene takes place in Jerusalem, and it began Jesus' final march to the cross.

Jesus' Receptions in Jerusalem (12:12-19)

Jesus' Triumphal Entry (12:12-18)

The crowd's joyous reception of Jesus (vv. 12-13)

[12] On the next day, when the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, [13] they took the branches of the palm trees and went out to meet Him, and began shouting, "Hosanna! BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD, indeed, the King of Israel!"

These crowds had come to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. And they saw Jesus as the king who would bring them freedom. The palm branches they waved symbolized victory.

Their word, ***“Hosanna!”*** means, ***“Save us, Now!”***

Granted, they were likely envisioning freedom from Roman chains and salvation from Rome’s domination.

But there was a God-centeredness to this longing for what only the Christ could do. They were God’s people, looking for God’s salvation.

Even what Jesus rode into the city fueled their Messianic hopes.

King Jesus’ royal entrance (vv. 14-15)

[14] Jesus, finding a young donkey, sat on it; as it is written: [15] “DO NOT FEAR, DAUGHTER OF ZION; BEHOLD, YOUR KING IS COMING, SEATED ON A DONKEY’S COLT.”⁹

Had Jesus come into town riding on a strong horse, it would have symbolized war. The donkey anticipated a peaceful kingly reign.

In the excitement of this day, Palm Sunday, Jesus enjoyed the greatest popularity of His life. And John fills in the gaps in our understanding of what was going on.

The testimony of the multitudes (vv. 16-18)

[16] These things His disciples did not understand at the first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things were written of Him, and that they had done these things for Him. [17] So the people, who were with Him when He called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead, continued to testify about Him. [18] For this reason also the people went to meet Him, because they heard that He had performed this sign.

Again, it was the raising of Lazarus from the dead that was the ***“sign”*** that finally convinced so many in the crowd on that day that Jesus was who He claimed to be.

This is a picture of the triumphal entry of King Jesus on what we call Palm Sunday (two weeks from today). People were bowing low as He passed, palm branches waving, shouts of acclamation filling the air.

It’s a beautiful scene and the people’s sails are set to catch Jesus’ wind and that wind directed them into proclamation.

But people and crowds can reset their sails. And with these new settings, they can sail off in dangerous directions.

Calvin Miller wrote this about these crowds who sang praises to Jesus on Palm Sunday: *Humanity is fickle. They may dress for a morning coronation and never feel the need to change clothes to attend an execution in the afternoon. So Triumphal Sundays and Good Fridays always fit comfortably into the same spring week.*” (Calvin Miller, from [The Singer](#))

The crowd gathered on Palm Sunday hadn’t yet seen Jesus cleanse the temple, or heard Him prophecy of Jerusalem’s destruction, or listened as He named the Pharisees, ***“a brood of vipers”*** and ***“white-washed tombs.”***

By the time Friday morning rolled around, these crowds had reset their souls’ sails and were shouting, ***“Crucify Him!”***

Even in this Palm Sunday crowd, a crack appeared in what seemed to be a monolithic following of Jesus.

The Pharisees’ Grudging Admission (v. 19)

[19] So the Pharisees said to one another, “You see that you are not accomplishing anything; look, the world has gone after Him!”

⁹ See Zechariah 9:9.

That isn't a pretty picture. The Pharisees had been trying for quite some time to draw attention away from Jesus and to convince people to not follow Him.

Oh, sure, they knew about the miracles. They knew of Jesus' claims to be Messiah and God. They knew of His powerful teachings and of His courage.

The problem (as they saw it) was that the more people followed Jesus, the fewer people followed them. They didn't want people following Jesus. They're upset.

We should envision them sulking, grumbling, pointing fingers at one another over the lack of success their efforts have had. They're always on the lookout for the right time to turn Jesus over to the authorities to get rid of Him.

Conclusion:

All that we've seen in Scripture today sets the stage for what is to come.

First, there are Jesus' words to His disciples as they observe the Passover meal in an upstairs room in Jerusalem. We'll explore these words together later in April. (John 13-17)

More immediately, today we have set the stage for the start of Jesus' sufferings that lead to the cross. We'll turn to that hard road next Sunday.

In light of what is to come, we hear the invitations to imitate those whose heart-sails were "set" to believe and to follow Jesus.

The extravagant worshiper...

Mary shows us the compelling beauty of extravagant worship. She invites us to express worship that is costly and sacrificial, that is beyond calculation.

How might any of us imitate Mary's extravagance?

Will it be a song you alone sing to Him in a quiet moment? Will it be a more expressive prayer of praise than you've ever prayed?

Will it be a costly gift of time or energy to serve Him, or a sacrificially significant gift of money to push His purposes forward in the world?

Let's all join Mary in "over the top" worship.

The diligent investigators...

The second scene, the one that shows the crowd outside of Lazarus' home looking to find out if it was all true, invites us each to a life of investigation, learning, and growth.

They were hungry to learn, were open and receptive to where the truth would take them.

*"Lazarus is really alive?! Well, Jesus must be **'the Christ, the Son of God!'**"*

Imitate this group and lead a life of investigation into the ways of Jesus. Be hungry to learn. Be open and receptive to where the truth about Jesus takes you.

Let Scripture inform you of the truth claims of Jesus and of the implications of His Lordship on your life - and submit to Him.

Learn about the exciting life of discipleship and disciple-making He has for you - and jump into the abundance of life lived to the full for Him.

The exuberant proclaimers...

Finally, listen to the crowds lining the road to Jerusalem as they enthusiastically proclaim the arrival of King Jesus.

John includes the scene a few days later when crowds of Jews cried out, **[John 19:6] "Crucify Him!"**

It might be that some of those there on Friday had been shouting "**Hosanna!**" here on Sunday.

They were dead wrong there, but they were spot on here. Here, on Palm Sunday, they got it right. Jesus is the king.

He is the One who brings salvation from sin and death, peace with God, and eternal life to all who believe.

So, we look for open doors to tell our friends and family. We'll even shout it from the rooftops. **"Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord!"**