

Passion Texts:
Mark 14:1-9
Philippians 2:5-11

3/25/18—Palm/Passion Sunday B

Palm Texts:
Psalm 118:1, 19-20, 25-29
Mark 11:1-11

Misunderstood

Save us! Hosanna! On the first day of the week, as he rides into the capital city, the crowds shout it out with one voice.

Hosanna means *save*. Save us! Save us now! It's the cry of citizens of Jerusalem and all the thousands in town for Passover—joyfully welcoming this One they believe to be a conquering hero. This One they're sure will deliver them from the occupying legions of Caesar's empire. Joyfully welcoming this One they're confident will liberate their country from the iron boot of Rome. This One they're certain will restore the unified kingdom established so long ago by David. Joyfully welcoming this One whose name is Jesus. *Hosanna! Save us now!*

The week has started out so well. Everybody's in a festive mood. Everybody's celebrating. Well, *almost* everybody. In one artist's depiction of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, you might notice that the only one without a smile is Jesus. Who doesn't stay overnight in the city, but heads out with the twelve to the village of Bethany.

Three days later, on the day we would call Wednesday, chief priests and scribes are plotting how to get rid of Jesus, according to Mark's Gospel. Only two days remain before the Passover. Only two days before Friday. Only two days before the cross.

And Jesus is still in Bethany. We find him in a setting that's not unfamiliar. We're used to seeing Jesus at table. And we know that he associates with outcasts. Like Simon the leper.

Come with me, for a few moments, to Simon's home. Imagine yourself in that house, at that table. It's a scene that engages your senses. You *taste* the wine and the simple Near Eastern dishes. Then you *see* a woman appear, carrying an alabaster jar. You *smell* the lovely fragrance of scented nard—its fragrance filling the room as she breaks open her jar and lavishes its expensive contents over the head of Jesus. Not just a few drops of it. Every last bit of it! She gives it all. Poured out. Overflowing. Running down. Costly. Precious.

And you *hear* the outraged protests of the dinner guests. *Unbelievable! That would have brought three hundred denarii—a whole year's wages! Think of the things we could do with that*

money! Think of the things we could do for the poor.

Unacceptable extravagance! What a waste!

Simon's guests don't understand this woman's use of incredibly pricey ointment. They misunderstand and misinterpret this woman's anointing of Jesus the Messiah. They misunderstand and misinterpret this woman's anointing of Jesus not long before his death. Their indignant objections reveal not only that they don't know that Jesus is the Messiah, but also that they don't understand the nature of Messiahship.

But you'd think his first disciples would understand. Wouldn't you? They've been with Jesus from the start. They're the insiders. They're supposed to get it. But from the time he calls them, they don't understand. Neither the stories—the parables—he tells, nor him who teaches in parables. After Jesus stills the storm and calms the sea, they wonder: *Who, then, is this?*

Peter gives voice to the misunderstanding they all share when he denounces the prophecy that the Messiah, the Christ, must suffer and die. Even after Jesus predicts his passion a second and a third time, all they can do is argue about who will

be greatest. And jockey for positions of importance in what they foresee as the Jesus administration.

Do you think Jesus wondered if his followers understood him at all? Knew him at all? On the night Jesus is arrested, when Peter denies him for the third time, he swears: *I do not know this man you are talking about*. Peter thinks this statement is a lie. But isn't it actually the truth?

Mark tells us that from the beginning of Jesus' ministry until its end, Jesus is misunderstood even by these twelve who are closest to him.

And Jesus is misunderstood by almost everyone who encounters him.

Religious authorities misunderstand Jesus. The chief priests and scribes and Pharisees view him as a threat to their privileged and prestigious status as interpreters of the Law. And they can't get past their fear that so many will believe in him that the forces of empire will react with a brutal crackdown.

But these leaders aren't the only ones. Political leaders misunderstand Jesus, too. Pontius Pilate's losing sleep over the possibility that Jesus' popularity will cause an uprising, which

just might make the big brass in Rome decide that their deputy in Judea can't control the natives and needs to be replaced.

Rome's soldiers, too, misunderstand Jesus. When you read Mark's passion narrative in its entirety, as I invite you to do during this Holy Week, you can almost hear them saying to one another: *Okay, guys, here's one more local zealot who thinks he's going to be a hero. Let's have a little fun with him.* And they whip and they strip. And they put a robe of royal purple on Jesus and place a thorny crown on his head. And the bitter irony is that they don't know. Those who mock his supposed kingship don't have a clue that the One they taunt reigns over a kingdom whose reality outlasts every earthly empire.

And the Jerusalem crowds misunderstand Jesus. They think he offers them salvation—from their oppressors. When they find out that he doesn't, they are mightily disillusioned. If you and I had been among them, would we have responded any differently?

My sisters and brothers, would *we* have cried *Hosanna* on Sunday and *Crucify!* on Friday?

Deep in the season of Lent, you and I reflect on how the world has misunderstood Jesus. And on how it still does. In the

church's first centuries, there were those who claimed that Jesus was a divine spirit. But not truly human. Today, many think of him as a gifted teacher of ethics. An exceptional human being. But not truly divine.

And isn't our contemporary culture still putting labels on Jesus? Labeling him as the one who will make us prosperous? Labeling him as the one who will chase all our troubles away and guarantee us happiness? Do we sometimes label Jesus as the wrathful one who—if even *once* we step out of line—will condemn us to an eternity of separation from God?

There are probably as many ways of misunderstanding Jesus as there are people. We love him. But do you think we understand him any better than first-century people did? Sometimes we travel a long and winding road before we can even begin to understand. We have been journeying toward a cross. And today its shadow falls across our path.

I think that the closer we get to the cross, the clearer understanding becomes. We get help from God's own Spirit and from God's holy word.

Today, in that word, we're shown a woman. A woman with an alabaster jar. We don't know her name. She doesn't say a

single word. But without being told, she knows who Jesus is. She anoints God's anointed One. God's Messiah. Just days before the death of Jesus, she anoints him with expensive ointment. Ointment with which the body of a king would be anointed for burial.

This nameless woman's prophetic act reveals her understanding. Her understanding that Jesus is King. *And* her understanding of what lies ahead for him. Jesus says that wherever the gospel is proclaimed, what she has done for him will be told in memory of her! His dinner companions are surprised.

Beloved, we worship and serve a God who is full of surprises. For two of the last people we would have expected to understand who Jesus is are the two who understand him best. A woman—a first-century, second-class citizen *woman*. And a man—a *foreigner*. A Gentile.

Who at Golgotha, at the cross, beholds the One hanging there. This officer in charge—this hardened veteran who has presided over so many executions—confesses that “Truly, this man was God's Son.” A Roman centurion knows the identity of Jesus and understands the truth of Jesus.

The Christ. The Messiah. God's own Son. Who loves with a vulnerable love. A self-emptying love. A love so lavish, so extravagant, that he gives it all. Poured out. Overflowing. Running down. Costly. Precious. Shed for your redemption and mine.

This is the One who suffers and dies, even as you and I lift up our eyes and plead: *Save us, Lord. Save us now!*

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.