

Sally Hammel:

Good morning, and welcome to morning prayers. Will you stand as you're able and join me in responsive reading song number 125. They who trust in God are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved but stands fast forever.

Congregation:

The hills stand about Jerusalem; so does God stand round about the people, from this time forth for evermore.

Sally Hammel:

The scepter of the wicked shall not hold sway over the land allotted to the just, so that the just shall not put their hands to evil.

Congregation:

Shoe your goodness, O God, to those who are good and to those who are true of heart.

Sally Hammel:

As for those who turn aside to crooked ways, God will lead them away with the evildoers; but peace be upon Israel.

Choir:

(singing)

Wes Conn:

In reading from the gospel remembered by John beginning at the first verse, six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There, they gave a dinner for him. Martha served and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of the disciples said, why was this perfume not sold for 300 denari and the money given to the poor? Jesus said, leave her alone. She bought it so that it might be kept for the day of my burial.

Wes Conn:

Our first experience with death likely occurred at the loss of a cherished pet or a beloved family member. And from this introduction, we continue to meet death in all of its forms in the painful passing of a parent, the loss of a colleague or the death of a dear friend. About six years ago, my grandmother died on St. Patrick's Day. At 88, death came as her body gave way to age. Prior to her death, she had a brief stint in the hospital that coincided with Ash Wednesday. Our pastor, on his visit with my grandmother took ashes with him knowing that she would appreciate having the sign of the cross made on her forehead as those familiar words were said, from dust you came and to dust you shall return.

Wes Conn:

That year, the ashes used at our church came from my personal stash of palm fronds saved from years past. My grandmother was pleased to learn that the ashes on her brow came from me. This would be the last time that she would have ashes smudged on her forehead.

Wes Conn:

Mary of Bethany was well acquainted with death. Our reading from John follows the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from his grave. Mary, being Lazarus' sister witnessed it all. Lazarus coming to death, Christ stooping into the tomb then calling Lazarus back to life. We're told that Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha provided dinner at their home in Bethany when Mary interrupted dinner with a jar of sumptuous perfume and poured it over Jesus' feet anointing him. The dining room filled with the delicate smell of perfume. The perfume was nard, oil extracted from a Himalayan plant worth a year's wage.

Wes Conn:

As Jesus, Martha, Judas and the others smelled the pungent perfume, vivid memory is erased to their minds. Memories of death, burial and lament. Surely Lazarus knew this smell well. Nard was designated for the rituals of death. It was to be poured on the cold corpse. What then was Mary of Bethany doing spilling this exquisite yet morose perfume on the living flesh of Jesus? Mary, she understood discipleship. She listened to the parables that Jesus taught. She knew what following was about. Mary recognized that the fullness of eternal life was now. It was here waiting for her, but to have it, she had to move the clutter that was taking up space in her life.

Wes Conn:

For Mary, the clutter may have been fear for her brother's life as the community leaders plotted to kill Lazarus. Maybe it was the anger when men around her scandalized her devotion to Jesus. I'm sure that among the clutter was the tension with her sister Martha, who always prepared and served Jesus food while Mary sat in conversation. Surely the terror of the Roman empire cluttered Mary's life. What's the clutter that keeps you from the fullness of life? Maybe it's a deep fear. Or could it be the overwhelming insecurities that hide in the shadows each day? Might it be guilt from something done or left undone. To begin lent, let's look to Mary of Bethany for some direction.

Wes Conn:

To get past the clutter in her life, Mary recalled the reality of Jesus' death and her own. Someday, nard would likely be massaged into her dead body. By confronting death, Mary was able to shake free from the clutter that kept her from living the precious gift of each day. Mary lived into the eternal life that was hers in this realm and in the next.

Wes Conn:

The rule of St. Benedict reminds monastics to keep death ever before them. It was common for Benedictines to keep a human skull nearby, maybe at the dinner table or on the nightstand into which they could gaze and be reminded of death. If staring at a skull isn't your thing, let's follow Mary of Bethany. Our lives likely have some illusions cluttering our ability to live. Let lent be a time to declutter. We are given an eternal life to live and appreciate now. For some, this lent will be their last, just as the smear of my burned palm fronds was my grandmother's last. In receiving the imposition of ashes today, let the aromas of death fill the air and clear the way to life.

Sally Hammel:

Please join me in reciting the Lord's prayer. Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven, give us this day our daily bread, and forgive

us of our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us, lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thy is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever, Amen.

Sally Hammel:

Please stand as you're able and join us in singing the hymn, "The Lord who Throughout These 40 Days," number 145.

Congregation/Choir:

(singing)

Sally Hammel:

It's Wednesday, so please join us downstairs in the Student Oasis for some refreshment and conversations. Now, let us go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

Speaker 2:

Amen.