

March 20, 2005  
John 12:1-11  
First Parish Church  
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## *The Hour at Hand*

Have you noticed that the standard greeting in our culture has shifted from “Hello, good morning.” to “Hi, how are you?” I became particularly aware of this a few years ago in Phoenix, when the grocery store I shopped at retrained their employees to greet customers this way. The goal was to be seen as a “friendly” place. The shift was so dramatic and the employees were a little stiff about it at first, so you couldn’t help but notice. However, it wasn’t a real question. It was simply a greeting. You sensed that we were all just to respond, “fine.” “Great” would be an even better answer. There was a forced sense of cheeriness about the whole thing.

I remember one day in particular that wasn’t a good day for me, although I don’t remember why. At the store that day, after at least the fifth employee had asked me how I was, and I’d responded with “Fine,” I’d had it. So, at the check out counter when the clerk asked me again how I was, I looked at her and said, “Well, actually this is not a good day.” Needless to say she was startled. She looked around quickly, sighed, and then whispered, “Me, too.” I think she wanted to make sure no supervisor heard her give a “non-cheery” response. But she made my day. I’d been heard.

I was interested to read in Friday’s *Times Record* about a man who moved

to Ireland and noticed how the Irish respond differently to this question. *The Irish see the world partly through their scars. When asked, “How are you?” Monagan finds the best answer the Irish will proffer is “Not too bad.” Forget about Americans’ reflexive “Good” or, heaven forbid, the bouncy “Great!”* (Pg. 27 “Take jaywalking tour of modern Ireland.”)

Now, the next time you run into me and automatically say, “Hi Mary, how are you?” don’t feel bad because I find myself doing the same thing. Even this past week as I was thinking about this, I caught myself several times automatically greeting someone, “Hi, how are you?” However, if we are going to use such a greeting, I think we ought to be prepared for a real response and maybe give a real response more often.

I wonder how Jesus might have responded if someone had asked him as he was entering into Jerusalem, “Jesus, how are you?” I imagine his answer might have been something like the classic Dickens’ line, “*It is the best of times, and it is the worst of times.*”

This Sunday before Easter is probably the strangest of times for us in the whole church year. It is the best of times. It is Palm Sunday and all the world loves a parade! The gathering of the people, the

excitement in the air, the chance to see something or someone special, or the opportunity to be seen - all these draw us to the public thoroughfare to be a part of what's going on.

It is also the worst of times. We also acknowledge this day as Passion Sunday. The hour is at hand when so much of what Jesus' disciples hoped for will crumble before their very eyes. Their hearts will be broken and their spirits terrified. And they did not know the rest of the story.

It is understandable to want to jump right from the parade of palms to the trumpets of Easter, and not want to be real about how things are in between. But things were very real in the between days. This Palm/Passion day is a reminder that along with the joys, the sorrows and struggles of life are always powerfully among us whenever we gather together. In light of today's story we realize:

- Some of us are anointing love ones who are in the process of dying.
- We continue to wonder what is too extravagant a use of our money when the poor are still very much among us.
- Recognizing that as Jesus rode into Jerusalem there were Roman soldiers standing guard, and knowing that this is the second anniversary of the military action in Iraq, we ponder what it means to be the occupation troops.

So how are we?

Maybe this hour at hand, this Palm/Passion Sunday is a most real day for us because it does have palms and passion, heaven and hell, anointing and betrayal all woven together. Which brings us to today's gospel reading.

Jesus is in Bethany and comes again to the home of his good friends, Lazarus, Martha, and Mary. As usual, Lazarus is a rather passive character sitting at table. But, you gotta love Martha and Mary. They are who they are. Martha is doing what Martha does. She is serving-caring for all the people who come into her home by nurturing their bodies. And Mary? Well, she's at Jesus' feet again, only this time she is serving him with the gift of anointing oil.

This is an amazingly tender scene. We are used to Jesus caring for others, but here he receives care from Martha and Mary. It is a reminder that the blessings of giving and receiving are bound one to the other.

However, all is not well. There is another key character in this scene - Judas Iscariot. We don't know a lot about Judas. The only things the four gospels agree on are that he betrayed Jesus and that he was a disciple. In Mark, the earliest gospel, Judas is a rather ordinary guy, who in the end betrays Jesus. However, by the time we get to John's gospel, the last gospel, Judas has become a more sinister character.

So, in today's gospel when Judas complains that the money spent for the anointing oil is wasted when it could have been given to the poor (a valid theological concern), the gospel writer dismisses any real concern Judas might have had in this regard and says it is only because Judas is a thief that he said such a thing. I'm not convinced. If Judas was just a creep (one of those persons that sends a chill up your spine just to be near them), you'd think at least one of the disciples would have spoken

up at the Last Supper and said, “I know, it’s Judas. I always knew there was something wrong with that guy.” But apparently they didn’t.

Why did Judas do such a horrible, despicable thing? (Why did the chief priests and the elders do such a despicable thing?) Why did Judas betray Jesus?

-Was it because he was greedy and just wanted the money?

-Was he jealous of Jesus’ increasing fame?

-Was it because he had lost faith in Jesus?

-Was it because he knew the authorities were out to get them, and he decided it would be better to sacrifice the one rather than to have a blood bath of many?

-Was it because he was frustrated that Jesus was not exerting his true authority (in the ways Judas thought he should) and he hoped to force Jesus’ hand in this way?

How is it that Judas was lost?

A few years ago in Vacation Bible School, I was doing an activity to help my class be aware of the names of those who are identified in scripture as the twelve disciples. I took twelve plastic eggs, with the name of one of the disciples in each of the eggs. However, instead of putting the whole name on a single piece of paper, I put each letter of the name on its own piece of paper so that the kids would have to unscramble the name.

Then I hid the eggs in the grapefruit grove in front of the office building. The assignment was for the class to go outside, find the eggs, bring them in, and rearrange the letters to form the

disciples’ names. When the time came, the class went out to find the eggs. When they returned they only had eleven. I glibly said, “Well, we’ll see who’s missing.” They opened the eggs, unscrambled the letters, and came up with the names of the disciples. Then it hit me who was lost – Judas Iscariot.

I have to confess there was a part of me that thought: *This is clever. I wish I’d thought of this.* Yet, I had not planned it. I had not paid any attention to which name I put in which egg. I had not purposely hidden Judas. I even went out with them and looked some more but we couldn’t find the other egg. Judas was lost.

It was the worst of times for Jesus and the disciples. And yet, the days ahead – this Holy Week- are full of the mystery of the transforming power of love- a love which enfolds us all –Lazarus, Martha, Mary and even Judas. It is the best of times.

The next day, one of the students went out and found the plastic egg with Judas’ name in it. There is hope. There is always hope.

I can imagine Jesus, in speaking of Judas, using the words of Edwin Markham:

*He drew a circle that shut me out  
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.  
But love and I had the wit to win,  
We drew a circle that took him in.*

The hour at hand is about just such a love.

