

# LOOKING AHEAD

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April 7, 2019

Lent 5

[Philippians 3:4b-9](#)

[John 12:1-8](#)

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(prayer)

At the end of July in 1987, I was back in Edmonton (home for the summer after my first eight months of studying at the Vancouver School of Theology). I had a summer job working as a waiter at a big chain pizza restaurant.

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If you were in the Edmonton area on July 31, 1987, you might remember that we experienced, what was, for us, a surprising, unprecedented [weather event](#).

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That day quickly became known as **Black Friday** as a Tornado began to form over Leduc County. It eventually touched down three times in eastern Edmonton as an F2 to F4 storm: Mill Woods, Refinery Row, and the Evergreen Mobile Home park. In total, the tornado was one the ground for an hour. Hundreds of people were injured. More than 300 homes were damaged. And, most tragically, twenty-seven people lost their lives.

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The details of those days are etched my memory. It had been a hot humid week. A typical summer pattern was following true to familiar form:

- Days started clear and sunny.
- The mid-day heat and humidity was as high as we get around here.
- In the late afternoon, the daytime heating formed storm clouds and small, intense thunderstorms came and went during the evening and overnight.
- And then the pattern repeated the next day.

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In reading the modern records of that time, I have learned that the week's weather was fueled by a low pressure system sitting over southwestern British Columbia feeding warm, humid air into central Alberta. Daytime heating included near-record dewpoints over Alberta: perfect conditions for summer storms.

On Friday, July 31, 1987, a cold front developed over western Alberta, colliding with the warm moist air that still persisted over the region. Severe thunderstorms developed rapidly over the foothills early in the day and quickly moved eastward. The first severe weather warnings and watches were issued over central Alberta late in the morning and continued early in the afternoon.

The language used on Weatheradio broadcasts and in interviews with the media stressed "vicious thunderstorms" and "extremely strong and violent thunderstorms". Unlike today, the wording in 1987 did not typically remind people that these kinds of storms could result in tornados and they didn't request that people seek shelter.

We expected rain and even hail, but not tornados. We weren't in Kansas, after all. I was only 23, but, personally, I don't ever remember hearing about tornados in Alberta before that day.

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I was scheduled to begin work at 5pm. I remember the hail beginning to fall about 3pm at our home in north central Edmonton. Watching out the window, I saw the (expected) pea-sized hail stones become ping-pong sized and then even baseball sized. At the height of the storm, I even braved the onslaught to go out and retrieve one almost the size of a softball. I kept that in a bag in the freezer for years.

By 3:30pm, I was on my way to work. It was only a fifteen minute drive. I had decided to go in a bit early (probably to grab a bite to eat before my shift started).

As I drove, it was still raining so hard that the wipers had trouble keeping up. About three blocks from home, I drove through a road puddle so large that the old 1970 Plymouth Valiant stalled and refused to restart. So, I had to abandon it and walk to the restaurant. So much for having time to eat.

I had no idea (but do now as I rēad the time-lines of the day) that as I walked eastward along 137th Ave toward Manning Drive (where the restaurant was/still is) [that] I was walking toward a killer tornado as it was ripping off roofs in Clairview on its way to wreak havoc in Evergreen.

At the time, I had no idea what was happening. I didn't learn the news until I arrived at work. I called home right away to tell my mom that I was all right: thinking she might be worried about me (long before cell phones). She hadn't even heard the news yet. To her, like to most of us outside of the twisters path, this was just an intense summer storm.

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It was a very odd evening at the restaurant. Very few customers for a Friday night. But from 8pm until closing, we set an all-time record for takeout sales.

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We have come a long way in the past 30 years. The information we get from meteorologists is based on much deeper data. We have local Doppler radar now *and*, high above us, advanced weather satellites allow for more accurate and reliable predictions. Severe Weather Alerts break into TV and radio broadcasts with loud electronic sirens to catch our attention. Smart phone weather apps can send us real-time notifications. And... if, based on the data, a tornado is even slightly possible, we are told!

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Severe weather doesn't catch us by surprise as much in 2019 as it did in 1987.

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With the help of modern technology, we can learn when a storm is coming. Long before we can see it with our eyes or feel it in our bones, we are given the opportunity to plan ahead.

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The final week of Lent allows us to observe Jesus during a rare time of rest and personal rejuvenation. But even as the relaxing aromas filled the room, a storm of concern began to stir. What we heard from the gospel of John is "the calm before the storm"

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The accounting of [The Anointing of Jesus](#) is one of those rare stories that was included in each of the [four biblical gospels](#). Now, some of the details vary: where it occurred; whether it early in Jesus' ministry or after Palm Sunday; who the woman was; what part of Jesus' body was anointed; was *hair* involved; and why the event bothered the others. Matthew and Mark are basically the same, John is quite similar to them (other than the name of the woman and the host). Luke has a unique take on the event and what it meant.

The basics of the dominant story (Matthew, Mark, John) are:

- Jesus is a guest in someone's home (for a meal). It appears that this host was a beneficiary of Jesus' skills as a healer.
- A woman (also attending the supper) approaches Jesus and anoints him with fragrant oils.
- The sight and smell of the ointment draw the attention of others in the room.
- Concerns are raised as to the appropriateness of her actions - in particular that the perfume was expensive and it should not have been wasted in such a way: rather, it should have been sold and the money given to the poor.
- Jesus defends the woman's actions, while, at the same time, not excusing people's obligations to help the poor.
- The story draws a parallel between the relaxing massage offered to Jesus and the anointing of a body for burial.

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As a matter of interest, the basics of the Luke version are:

- First of all, Luke does not include it as a Holy Week event (between Palm Sunday and Good Friday) and instead has it earlier in Jesus' ministry.
- The location is not the home of a recipient of healing (Simon the Leper in Mt-Mk; Lazarus in Jn) but the host is a religious official (Simon the Pharisee) - the presumption is that this was someone quite highly respected within the community.
- The woman is **not** a guest, but a party crasher. Her reputation in the community is very poor: "a sinner" according to the text.
- She cries as she anoints Jesus.
- It is her reputation that raised concern, not the cost of the ointment. Jesus confuses the other guests by announcing her sins, forgiven.
- There is no mention of a burial ritual in Luke.

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Today we read from John: as I said very similar to Matthew/Mark. John does adjust the details slightly:

- Instead of this being at the home of Simon the Leper, John dove-tails the anointing with the resurrection of Lazarus, locating this story at Lazarus' home.
- John says that it is Lazarus' sister, Mary, who anoints Jesus. Mt-Mk don't name the woman, but say that she will be famous forever for what she did.
- Whereas Mk-Mt say that the disciples (as a group) were concerned about the wastefulness, John limits this concern to Judas Iscariot... and adds an editorial comment questioning the true nature of why Judas voiced the concern.

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I don't get too hung up on the differences.

I'm not going to try to explain which versions have Jesus head anointed, which have his feet anointed, and which says both. But I will add that when it is the feet, the woman uses her hair as a towel. I guess it made sense to let the hair, air dry, but you wouldn't want Jesus walking around with oily feet.

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I am quite confident that at the root of all of these accounts is a common event in the life of Jesus. I'm okay with the fact that as the story was shared in different places, different storytellers may fleshed out the narrative with a few different side details.

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Alright, if you are a strict biblical literalist and insist that **every** word has to be historically verifiable in and of themselves, it is okay to think that Jesus was anointed three or more times - or - if it was just once, that Simon the Pharisee once suffered from leprosy and that he was a neighbour of Lazarus in Bethany and that they co-hosted the dinner together where Jesus was anointed from head to toe. Oh, and Mary might not have been welcome to a party in her own house because she was outcast as an unforgivable sinner.

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It's not the minute details that matter; it's what this event meant to Jesus' followers at the time and years later as the story was shared... and that includes what it might mean to us as we hear it today!

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The common thread at the root of all of the new testament versions:

- A woman anoints Jesus with a fragrant ointment while he is a guest at a dinner.
- The appropriateness of what was happening was openly criticized.
- Jesus defends the woman and her actions and makes her feel welcome.
- Jesus ends by looking ahead to something more significant.

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It is that last point that stands out to me today.

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Luke's version focuses on looking ahead to a life and faith reconnected to God and community (the impact of the woman's forgiveness).

John and the others invite the gospel reader to begin to look ahead to future opportunities to help the poor **and** to be looking ahead to the end of Jesus' life and what that might mean for them.

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The time *we are in now* can often be a time to (both) revel in the moment **and** to be anticipating what is to come.

Both have value.

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Jesus has been quoted (in other parts of the bible) that life with him was not necessarily going to be comfortable: *foxes have holes, birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head; to be a disciple, you must take up your cross and follow me*. But here, in today's story, Jesus is offered a brief opportunity for rest, relaxation and luxurious comfort.

I love the way Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber wrote the emotion in to the line (From [Jesus Christ Superstar](#)): *"Mmm Mary that is good, while you prattle through your supper, where and when and who and how. She alone has tried to give me what I need right here and now."*

All the while, the disciples just want to know what is *next* on the agenda: *What's the buzz, tell me what's a-happenin'*.

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The story of Jesus' anointing can remind us of the dual purpose of each moment:

- What we need right here and now, and
- What we need to be getting ready for.

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Provincial Election - coming up in 9 days.

I made the mistake of inviting some healthy discourse on my [personal facebook page](#) -- concerning one of the central issues of the campaign and my own personal experience with it.

As happens on social media, this lead to me being personally insulted publicly by someone with a different perspective: they made it clear that I was both too dumb and too poor to have any valid

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opinion.

Now, I am not an alpha personality. So, back in my cave, I will go.

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Regardless... for all of us (whatever your hopes and dreams for Alberta are), those of you willing and able to vote on April 16th will be marking your "X" based on your own assessment of the needs of the moment and your view of what is to come.

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The story of Jesus' anointing points to the tried and true reality of being mindful of how we take in and respond to the events around us - both those circumstances we influence and those beyond our control.

We seek to understand where we are and where we might be going... and what we are going to do about it.

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John's version of the anointing of Jesus, which we heard today, offers some options for what to do with the *pound of expensive perfume made of pure nard*.

Spikenard or Muskroot is an oil derived from a flowering plant that grows in the highlands of the Himalaya mountains. It was rare beyond the circles of the elite in Judea.

How Mary obtained it must be a very interesting story, but no biblical writer thought to include that one. John does quote Jesus as saying that Mary had bought it to be a burial spice. Perhaps it has been in the family for a while and was used for family funerals. I wonder whether Lazarus' body had been anointed with the same perfume.

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At this dinner party, Mary retrieves the jar. What is she to do with this unusual perfume:

- Use it as a perfume:
  - save it for the preparation of bodies for future family funerals, or
  - ease Jesus' tired feet and give the banquet hall an exotic aroma and feel, right now.
- Sell it to someone and make some money:
  - money that could be given directly to the poor, or
  - fund some ministry program, or
  - line the pockets of an unscrupulous treasurer.

We heard what Mary chose. Onlookers thought she was too short-sighted.

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It was Jesus who connected *the moment they were in* to things that might happen looking forward.

*Don't berate her.*

(Jesus said)

*There is no value in crying over spilled nard.*

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*Yes, Judas, the poor need those of us (with a bit more) to help ease their suffering.*

*Of course, that would still be true whether or not Mary's perfume had been sold and the funds put in your money box over there.*

*But, surely you don't think that one jar of muskroot is going to be enough to eliminate poverty in the middle east.*

*Today, and tomorrow, we all still need to live up to the just and right call to give the [Tzed-a-kah](#). The need will (sadly) always be there.*

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*But, don't simply write off Mary's actions as being short-sighted. She not only blessed this room (and me) with these wonderful aromas right now, but remember that these are also her family funeral spices. Lazarus, Martha and Mary consider me a part of their family. Let's also look at what happened here tonight as her honouring me **before** I am dead.*

(looking right at Mary)

*I - for one - am glad*

*that I was alive to experience it.*

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Now, we don't know if the disciples interpreted this act of Mary as a premonition that Jesus might soon be dead.

The gospel writer knows where the narrative is going and is clearly foreshadowing what is about to happen for his audience. And the late first century readers would certainly be seeing these words through good friday glasses.

But even if the disciples in the room didn't "get it" in *that* way - and based on other times Jesus tries to get them to imagine beyond the obvious, they probably didn't - the message of appreciating the moment at hand as *well* as looking ahead might have gotten through.

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In a similar vein, the apostle Paul, in that letter to the church at Philippii, was not content to rest on his own laurels. He *could* avoid doing new things and rely on his impressive resumé to try and convince the new Philippian believers to listen to him.

But Paul, wants the church not to be living in the past, but to be appreciating the freshness of their current faith, because faith is constantly being renewed. Paul admits that he is the same as them in this regard. In spite of all he could boast about, faith was constantly being renewed in him as well.

This on-going experience of holiness was the promise of Paul's letter. That was what Paul was most proud of --- He was open to the mystery that how he knows that sacred nature to his life, not by anything that he has accomplished on his own, but by the grace of God.

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On this final Sunday before we come to Holy Week, let us glean from our scriptures the invitation to:

- Appreciate the opportunities of **now**.

AND

- Anticipate the opportunities of **next**.

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There is a sacredness for us in both of those places.

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That is certainly a hope worth looking forward to.

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Let us pray:

Extravagant God, open our hearts to know the joy of your presence right now... and the joy of lavishing our gifts of tangible hope and promise upon others. Amen.

#642VU "Be Thou My Vision"