

Mapping the Sacred: The Paths of Action, Imagination & Time

John 12:1–8

There is a house in Bethany.

You can imagine it if you like: stone walls that hold the warmth of the day, a table worn smooth by years of meals, voices layered over each other in the comfortable way that happens when people know each other well enough to interrupt.

Six days before Passover, Jesus arrives there.

Six days before the story tightens.

Six days before everything breaks open.

Lazarus is at the table. That detail alone would make the evening strange. A man who had been dead is now eating bread. Imagine the silence that must have occasionally fallen across the room as someone noticed him again. Imagine the quiet wonder of it.

Death had been there. And then it had not.

Martha moves through the room carrying bowls and bread and cups. If you have ever loved someone who hosts meals, you know this choreography: the small turning of the body to pass behind a chair, the quick glance to see who needs water, the silent calculation of whether there is enough food.

Martha walks the **Path of Action**.

There is holiness in this path. Not dramatic holiness. Not the kind that makes headlines. The kind that cooks soup when someone is

sick. The kind that folds chairs after meetings. The kind that makes sure the light is on when people arrive.

Action is love made visible.

The Gospel tells us simply: *Martha served.*

It does not explain it.

It does not praise it.

It simply says it.

Sometimes the most sacred things are described in the quietest sentences.

But Mary is not serving.

Mary has slipped away.

Perhaps she is in another room, holding a jar that has been in the family for years. Alabaster. Fragile. Heavy with perfume that came from far away. The kind of thing people save for weddings or funerals.

She holds it for a moment.

And then she brings it into the room.

If you listen carefully to the story, you can hear the moment when the evening changes.

Because Mary kneels beside Jesus.

And breaks the jar.

The sound alone would stop the room.

Alabaster cracking open.

Then the scent arrives.

Strong. Sweet. Almost overwhelming.

Perfume spills across Jesus' feet, across the floor, across the moment.

Mary lets down her hair; another scandal in a room already full of them, and wipes his feet with it.

The Gospel says something that feels almost poetic:

The house was filled with the fragrance.

Not the corner.

Not the table.

The house.

Which means everyone breathed it.

Even the ones who disapproved.

Mary has stepped onto the **Path of Imagination**.

And imagination, in the sacred sense, is not about fantasy.

It is about seeing the story beneath the story.

Jesus has been talking about suffering. About death. About betrayal. Words like these are often too heavy for a dinner table. People tend to look away from them.

But Mary has listened.

She has heard what others hoped was not true.

And so she does something strange and beautiful.

She prepares him for burial before the world has even admitted he will die.

It is a prophetic act.

A poem spoken with perfume.

But not everyone understands poetry.

Judas speaks.

And Judas sounds practical.

You have met people like this before — perhaps you have been one of them. People who see extravagance and immediately calculate cost.

“Why was this perfume not sold and the money given to the poor?”

Three hundred denarii.

A year’s wages.

His question sounds reasonable.

And perhaps that is what makes it unsettling.

Because practical questions often arrive precisely when someone is doing something beautiful.

There is a tension in the room now.

Between usefulness and beauty.

Between calculation and love.

Between efficiency and imagination.

The world often prefers usefulness.

Usefulness feels responsible.

Imagination feels dangerous.

But the sacred often lives in the dangerous places.

Because imagination allows us to see something others cannot yet see.

Mary sees that time is running out.

Jesus confirms it in a strange sentence.

“You will not always have me.”

And suddenly another path emerges from the story.

The **Path of Time**.

Time is a teacher.

Sometimes a gentle one.

Sometimes not.

Time reminds us that moments pass.

That dinner tables become memories.

That conversations we meant to have are sometimes never spoken.

That people we love are not here forever.

Mary knows something about time.

Perhaps she learned it when her brother died.

When grief rearranged the house and silence sat in the chairs where laughter used to be.

Grief has a way of teaching us how precious moments are.

So Mary does not wait.

She does not say, "Someday I will show my love."

She says it now.

With perfume.

With courage.

With a gesture that will be remembered long after the smell fades from the room.

The **Path of Action**, the **Path of Imagination**, and the **Path of Time** meet here.

And if we listen closely, we may hear the story asking us a quiet question.

Which path is calling you these days?

Some people are Martha people.

You walk the **Path of Action**.

You see what needs doing.

You are the ones who arrive early and stay late.

Churches run because of you.

Communities survive because of you.

You know the sacredness of practical love.

But sometimes people on this path wonder if what they do is noticed.

If carrying the plates matters.

If washing the dishes counts as prayer.

The Gospel gives Martha only two words.

Martha served.

And perhaps that is enough.

Because sometimes holiness looks exactly like that.

Others walk the **Path of Imagination**.

You are the ones who ask different questions.

You see patterns and possibilities.

You notice the poetry hidden in ordinary moments.

You are the storytellers, the artists, the dreamers.

Sometimes people do not understand you.

Sometimes they say things like, “Be realistic.”

But imagination is how the future enters the present.

Without imagination we cannot see what God might yet be doing.

And then there is the **Path of Time**.

This path often arrives quietly.

You begin to notice that life is not endless.

That opportunities appear and disappear.

That kindness offered at the right moment becomes a blessing someone carries for years.

You begin to pay attention.

To the moment.

To the people in front of you.

To the words that need to be spoken before the moment passes.

Mary walks this path with courage.

She recognizes the sacred moment.

And she responds.

The fragrance fills the house.

I love that detail.

Because it means Mary’s act did not stay private.

Everyone breathed it in.

Even Judas.

Even the ones who thought it was foolish.

That is how sacred acts work.

One gesture of love can fill a whole room.

One moment of courage can change the atmosphere of a place.

One act of imagination can open a door people did not know existed.

Two thousand years later we are still breathing the fragrance of Mary's act.

Still wondering what courage like that might look like in our own lives.

Perhaps the story is inviting us to notice something.

The sacred does not always arrive with thunder.

Sometimes it arrives quietly.

At a dinner table.

In a house in Bethany.

In the middle of a conversation.

And the question becomes:

Will we recognize it?

Will we act with love?

Will we imagine what others cannot yet see?

Will we trust the moment when it arrives?

Because sometimes the kingdom of God looks like Martha carrying bread.

Sometimes it looks like Mary pouring perfume.

And sometimes it looks like a moment in time that asks us to respond before it disappears.

And when we do...

The fragrance spreads.

Across a room.

Across a community.

Across generations.

Until one day someone else tells the story again.

And breathes it in.

This week, you might try a small experiment.

Nothing dramatic.

Just a way of paying attention to the sacred paths.

Perhaps one day this week you might walk the **Path of Action**.

Do one simple act of care for someone.

Cook a meal.

Send a note.

Offer help before someone asks.

Let love take a practical shape.

Another day you might walk the **Path of Imagination.**

Pause long enough to notice beauty.

A line of poetry.

A piece of music.

The way sunlight moves across a room.

Ask yourself: *What story might be unfolding here that I cannot yet see?*

And perhaps sometime this week you might walk the **Path of Time.**

Notice a moment that feels quietly sacred.

A conversation.

A walk.

A shared cup of coffee.

Instead of rushing past it, stay with it.

Speak the kind word.

Offer the blessing.

Say the thing that matters.

Because sometimes the sacred arrives quietly.

At a table.

In a moment.

In a small act of courage.

And when we respond...

The fragrance spreads.

Across a room.

Across a life.

Across the world.

Amen.