



## DINNER WITH JESUS



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John 11:53-12:19  
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The Maverick's Surf Contest is a fast-paced, danger-laden thrill ride. But unlike Olympics snowboard events, the Maverick's contest can't be scheduled ahead of time. The giant waves that crash off Pillar Point with enough force to register on a seismograph depend on a confluence of factors. Thousands of miles away in the Gulf of Alaska large storms stir up the ocean as high and low pressure weather systems collide. At the right time, when tides and currents and temperatures are favorable, gathered energy flows eastward across the Pacific Ocean. The geology of the ocean floor then funnels this energy, creating a wall of water that can rise sixty feet or more in the air as it rushes towards the shore. The best surfers in the world wait eagerly, but must live with uncertainty. Great waves are not subject to human orchestration. They can be anticipated, but their arrival is not subject to anyone's control.

Similarly, John's gospel requires readers to wait in anticipation of a stirring climax. There are repeated references to an hour that has not yet come. The final crisis must occur in Jerusalem and, more than the other gospels, John tells of Jesus entering and retreating again from the Holy city. The Lord's enemies grow more determined and his disciples more concerned, but time and again the tense moment passes.

In the text before us here, John 11:53-12:19, the waiting is ended. Jesus departs a final time from Jerusalem and then returns again to fight the last battle—to give his life so death will die. Finally, the great wave is cresting and it will shake all creation when it breaks.

John 11:53-57—

**So from that day on they made plans to put him to death.**

**<sup>54</sup>Jesus therefore no longer walked openly among the Jews, but went from there to the region near the wilderness, to a town called Ephraim, and there he stayed with the disciples.**

**<sup>55</sup>Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify**

**themselves. <sup>56</sup>They were looking for Jesus and saying to one another as they stood in the temple, "What do you think? That he will not come to the feast at all?" <sup>57</sup>Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where he was, he should let them know, so that they might arrest him.**

Passover is a time to hope for God to act again as he did during the Exodus to free his people from oppression. The gathered crowds wonder what role Jesus might play. *"What do you think? That he will not come to the feast at all?"*

This is the third Passover mentioned by John during the years of Jesus' public ministry. On the first two occasions Jesus had to resist the nationalistic passions of his countrymen.

*"Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people"* (John 2:23-24).

In chapter 6, the feeding of the five thousand on a hillside near the Sea of Galilee occurred at Passover time. The miracle feeding led to pressure from the crowd who wanted to make Jesus king on their terms.

*"Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself"* (John 6:15).

Now we've come to the third Passover in John's gospel. I want to read first the account of Jesus' triumphal entry on Palm Sunday and then go back and consider John's description of an event that occurred the night before.

John 12:9-13—

**When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>10</sup>So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, <sup>11</sup>because on account of him many of the Jews were going**

away and believing in Jesus. <sup>12</sup>The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. <sup>13</sup>So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!”

Hosanna means “save us.” The phrase, “*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord,*” is a quotation from Psalm 118. It was a familiar exclamation spoken to pilgrims during the festivals in Jerusalem. However, the next line, “*even the King of Israel*” is unexpected and again we see that Jesus has aroused hope for deliverance from Roman oppression. When these expectations are dashed the adoring crowd will turn on Jesus.

John 12:14-19—

**And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written,**

**<sup>15</sup>“Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt!”**

**<sup>16</sup>His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him. <sup>17</sup>The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to bear witness. <sup>18</sup>The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had done this sign. <sup>19</sup>So the Pharisees said to one another, “You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him.”**

The cheering crowds, Jesus’ band of disciples, prophetic promises, and determined enemies are all in place. This is the last Sunday of the Lord’s life and events are moving inexorably toward Passover Friday and the cross. The wave has reached its zenith, yet John includes an unexpected prelude—story of a dinner party in Bethany.

John 12:1-8—

**Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup>So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him**

**at table. <sup>3</sup>Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. <sup>4</sup>But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, <sup>5</sup>“Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?” <sup>6</sup>He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it. <sup>7</sup>Jesus said, “Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup>For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me.”**

The loveliness of this evening is compelling. In twenty-first century Silicon Valley a leisurely dinner with people you love, having Christ at the center, seems almost impossible. These people were not plagued by ‘too many other things to do’ or by intrusive electronic interruptions. The setting is ordinary and the meal was simple, yet the vision of Jesus among his friends fills us with longing.

I want us to engage imaginatively with three of the dinner companions who loved the Lord and then to give attention to Judas as well. Martha, Lazarus, and Mary each have different temperaments and express their love for Jesus in different ways. We see that each of them receives the Lord’s approval and that their differences do not divide them from each other.

First, we are told that ‘*Martha served*’ and this is consistent with what we know of her elsewhere in the New Testament. Martha’s gifts and personality inclined her to hands-on acts of service. Unfortunately Martha and those like her are too often undervalued. The work of service is seen as necessary (“Thanks sooo much Martha for the wonderful meal!”) but not really valuable. This perspective is very foolish. In fact, Martha reminds us that God created human beings as a profound combination of body and spirit. Those who use their gifts, in love, to care for the physical needs of others delight the heart of God.

Throughout church history it is the tribe of Martha which has built hospitals and rescue missions in Jesus’ name. They minister to the homeless and welcome orphans, clothe and feed the poor. They advocate for the disabled and make sure that church communities accommodate the very old and the very young. At the end of the age, Martha and her heirs receive special commendation from the Lord:

*“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ ... And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’”* (Matthew 25:34-36, 40)

*‘Martha served’* and she pleased the Lord.

What about Lazarus? We read that, like Jesus, he *‘was one of those reclining at table.’* His example should encourage us as well. The Lord wants us to be at home in his presence. We belong at Jesus’ table along with everyone else who says yes to his invitation. In this fellowship there is laughter, learning, challenge, and blessing.

My son David and I went to the Rose Bowl this past January 1<sup>st</sup>. Leaving aside the regrettable end to the football game, it was a wonderful occasion; great weather and a beautiful setting. We planned a tailgate brunch before the game with a grand group of friends and family. The trick was getting everyone to the proper location. Parking was spread out around the stadium and hundreds of pre-game parties were taking place. Cell phone coordination eventually got our group together.

On the way I had walked past other parties filled with strangers to which I hadn’t been invited. It made all the difference to arrive at the gathering where I was known and welcomed, to *‘recline at table’* with family and friends. Jesus seeks disciples who are at home in his presence, who enjoy the circle of fellowship he creates.

However, like Lazarus, those who enjoy Jesus’ friendship end up sharing his fate. Jesus’ enemies who were seeking to kill him made Lazarus a wanted man as well (John 12:10). In John 15:15 Jesus said, *“I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.”* But a couple verses later we read, *“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you”* (verse 18). Intimate fellowship with Jesus is a glorious privilege that leaves his mark on us.

Mary’s story is perhaps the most remarkable of the three siblings. Martha was a servant, Lazarus a friend, and Mary a worshipper of Jesus. She was, we might say, an artist who adored Christ with her emotions by using her physical senses—touch and fragrance, the sight and sounds of her burial preparation. Her unbound hair would have been considered disgraceful but Mary did not care about the

impression she left with onlookers. Her ‘whole person’ attention to Christ allowed her to overcome criticism and the bondage of social conventions. Jesus said, *“Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me”* (Mark 14:6).

The clan of Mary, artists and poets who worship in freedom, have always had a powerful influence on those around them. My friend Brian Morgan has written movingly about a poet and preacher named Traian Dorz. Dorz, the spiritual leader of a large group of Romanian Christians, suffered mightily for his faith under the brutal Ceausescu regime in Romania in the 1980s. Quoting Brian:

*He was a man of small stature, but he possessed a powerful presence; a peasant, yet a king. Here was a man who endured more suffering and swallowed more evil than I can comprehend. Seeing him, I felt conflicting emotions roaring within me. Repelled by my own sense of unworthiness, I felt like dust on the scale, yet at the same time I was drawn by a holy love. He took me in his arms and looked deep in my eyes and said, ‘You teach about the cross. We live under the cross.’ Then he gently pressed his cheek to mine and prayed for me. I needed no translation. He prayed that I might know something of the unspeakable love of Christ he had experienced in his suffering. The words rolled off his tongue in dream-like cadences. The soft timber of his voice and those pulsating rhythms seized me and tore my heart like water. That one touch was all I would ever receive from the poet. But it was all I needed. I woke up in the middle of the night weeping, and asked God to give me something of the Spirit of this man.*

Traian Dorz is of the ‘tribe of Mary.’ They stir our emotions and communicate truth through actions and images—and they are pleasing to their Lord.

Judas is the fourth member of the dinner party who is mentioned by name. In popular media he is sometimes portrayed as a lonely and tragic, even sympathetic figure. However, John’s gospel is resolute in its negative depiction of Judas. His rejection of Jesus’ love, his cold-hearted betrayal, is contemptuous. John writes of Judas’ choices and their consequences to sound a clear warning to hypocrites and false disciples. In John 12 we discover Judas’ long habit of succumbing to the temptations of money.

The betrayer is aptly described in Paul’s words: *“For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and*

*pierced themselves with many pangs*” (1 Timothy 6:10).

The glitter of gold turned him away from the beauty of the Savior. Surely he got to this point by stages. Perhaps it began by taking a few coins out of the money bag, then a few more, and over time John’s stark description became the truth: he was a thief. A thief and a hypocrite who claimed to be concerned about the poor. It is not uncommon for lovers of money to speak in moving terms of ‘the poor’ as a conceptual category that are located somewhere else. Greed and the appearance of concern for others often go hand in hand.

Jesus’ statement *“that the poor you will always have with you”* presents a challenge. It is human nature to lose interest in intractable problems. When our labors to help difficult individuals prove fruitless we often turn away from them. Large-scale efforts to solve the problem of urban homelessness come and go. Handouts are sometimes counter-productive. It is difficult to know what God wants us to do with the complex questions posed by human need. However, Jesus makes clear that a prediction of success can’t be what motivates us. We should give our time and resources sacrificially in Jesus name, to honor him, even if we can’t point to measurable change at the end of the day.

At the dinner party in Bethany, Mary and Judas offer opposing alternatives. Judas held tightly to the money pouch and put a price tag on everything. Mary’s extravagance was made possible because the glory of the Lord outshone all other considerations. “Turn your eyes on Jesus,” says the old song, “and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace.” The more his beauty captivates us, the less likely we are to succumb to temptation.

The wave is at its highest point. The final week of Jesus’ life is upon us. The world is about to change. In view of great events near at hand John tells the story of a small community gathered around Jesus both to encourage us and to warn us.