

Not a Tame Lion

John 11:45—12:11

A few weeks ago, Mark talked about the signs of Jesus as the fruit of his work; if you want to know what following Jesus looks like, look at his signs. Look and see that he brings life and joy wherever he goes, upturning the social order to love and care for those whom society rejects. Look and see how he satisfies our deepest needs and challenges our assumptions about where sin comes from and how it affects our life. Look and see that he raises even the dead, cold, dark stuff and transforms it into life, filling the earth with God's glory.

There are many who saw what Jesus did, and they believed.

And there are also those who saw what Jesus did and went to the Pharisees and told them everything that Jesus had done. They did not believe. They were threatened by Jesus' signs and looked for a way to eliminate that threat. The answer, so it seems, must be death to the one who threatens their security. Jesus does not fit inside their secure national, religious box, and so they want to get rid of him. They want to kill him to keep their idea of who God is neatly inside the box they have put him. They try to control God, keeping him tightly under wraps for their own benefit. When fear governs our faith, someone always becomes expendable.

The raising of Lazarus from the dead, which we read last week, is the tipping point in the Gospel of John. Things are rapidly escalating. The Jewish leaders have wanted to kill Jesus for some time, but now they are strategizing exactly *how* to carry out their plan. They've tried persecuting, ostracizing, arresting, and even stoning him, and all attempts to do so have been unsuccessful. Jesus' following continues to grow, however, there are also those who decide that this Jesus-way isn't for them, and they walk away, some going so far as to report on Jesus' actions to the Pharisees.

The resulting debate among the Pharisees reveals a deep desire for self-preservation, for protecting themselves, their way of life, and their nation. If they allow Jesus to carry on, they say, then *"everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation."*¹ This man, Jesus, has put their entire religion and nation at risk; they fear that the Romans will view him as an revolutionary and will take their vengeance on the Jewish people. There is too much about Jesus that offends their carefully structured religious order, and so they seek to have him killed. Stoning is not enough; they want a legitimate Roman execution.

When confronted with the possibility that Jesus is their long-awaited Messiah, the religious leaders can't handle it. Even after seven signs done by Jesus—turning the water into wine,

¹ John 11:48, NIV

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healing the official's son, healing the crippled man, feeding the five thousand, walking on water, healing the blind man, and finally, raising Lazarus from the dead—*they still do not believe*.

Thank goodness that we aren't at all like the Pharisees today, trusting in governments and ideologies to protect us, or looking to popular icons to tell us how we can be safe. Thank goodness for that, or else we might need to spend a lot more time meditating on whether Jesus might ask us to give up our assumptions and values.

The irony is that despite the Pharisees' attempts to control the narrative, Jesus ends up surrendering himself to death entirely on his own terms. Caiaphas' prophecy indicates that Jesus' death will enact something far greater than they could ever conceive. God is not controlled by the schemes of humankind. Instead, he works it for his purposes, charting the course to resurrection life even in the plots for his death. Jesus will die on behalf of the nation, and not only for the Jewish nation, but for all those who are scattered across the Roman Empire and the world, including the non-Jews, to bring them together and make them one.

The Pharisees and teachers of the law can't accept that Jesus is God. They can't accept that God would walk, breathe, and live among them. And so, being unable to accept it, they try to get rid of the problem; only, the problem is God. It's a sobering thought: they try to get rid of God. In any good engagement with Scripture, we must engage the heart as well as the mind, so as I pondered this, I had to ask myself: How do I try to get rid of or control God when he tries to show me something about himself? If I turn this question around on myself, that gets uncomfortable.

A few months ago at the Banff Pastor's Conference, I was confronted with my own tendency to keep things neat, tidy, and controlled. Troy, Angela, and I were sitting at the brunch table, enjoying a perfectly good brunch, when Troy suddenly said, "I think my sermon next week isn't going to follow the Gospel of John at all." I was horrified. We had agreed as a preaching team to follow the Gospel of John for this year! If he didn't preach on the passage that he had signed up for, then would all the following passages be moved to another Sunday? Would the passages be cut up and spread out so that the schedule would stay the same? It could change everything! We had prayed over it, planned it, and agreed to follow the schedule that would take us through the entire Gospel and finish exactly at Easter. He couldn't change it just like that! And I told him so, in just so many words.

I might also add that our denominational minister, Tim Kerber, was sitting beside me at the table as I expressed all of my outrage at Troy's deviation from the schedule.

Once I wound down and took a breath, Troy said, "Yeah you're right, let's *not* listen to the Holy Spirit." This earned him an eyeroll and a laugh at myself. It was just the kick in the pants that I needed to remind me that our preaching schedule, as carefully planned as it had been, did not

keep the Spirit of God contained. God could—and would—act in unpredictable ways that might actually be better than our original plan. For a moment, I was so stuck on following our predetermined schedule that I was not willing to listen to how God was moving in our midst, how he might be suggesting something else to share with you all, something entirely outside of what we had originally imagined.

I had put God in a box, and this interaction showed me (again! This is a recurrent life lesson) that he is not a God who can be boxed in. I could buckle down and dig in my heels, insisting that we needed to follow the plan... or I could listen to what God was saying to my brother and make space for his Spirit to move. Ah, but that's hard. It requires me giving up my control.

In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, there is an interaction that describes this unpredictable, uncontrollable God even better than I could put it. Mr. Beaver explains to the Pevensie children that Aslan is a most powerful lion. Susan then asks, "I'd thought he was a man. Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion"...

"Safe?" said Mr. Beaver ... "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

Then, near the end of the book, Mr. Beaver says, "He's wild, you know. Not like a tame lion."²

Aslan, the Christ-figure in the story, is *not* tame. He cannot be controlled. He comes and goes as he pleases; he's not *safe*, but he is *good*.

What a wonderful, terrifying way to describe God. He is not safe; we don't know where he blows or goes, but he is good, and that is perhaps the safest place in the world—to be with him, walking with him, loving him as he presents himself to us, knowing that we cannot make him in our image.

That frightens us. We want to control him. We want to put God in a box and keep him there. Only, if we do that, then we will never experience his great and lavish goodness. We will never know what a life of walking, talking, and being with him is like. The Pharisees, terrified of the changes that Jesus represents, react by plotting to kill him. They cannot handle what God is asking of them, and so they buckle down, dig in, and refuse to listen to what God-in-flesh is saying to them.

How have we put God in a box? When the words of Jesus and the presence of the Spirit confront our assumptions—of what life should be like, of who should have what sorts of privileges, of what our jobs, children, parents, and friends should look like—how do we respond? When our pillars of security—our careers, homes, voting status, and national pride—

² C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.

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are challenged, to whom do we run to tell of our fears and anxieties? How do we hope the problem will be solved? Who becomes expendable when our priorities and worldview are upset?

He's not a tame God.

In contrast to the powerful religion elite, there are those who are powerless in this story. Those who are *not* religious leaders are the ones who work for God's good, searching for Jesus even as he hides from those who would arrest him. And of course, there is Mary of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus, who takes a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume from the northern regions of India worth an entire year's wages, and breaks it on the feet of Jesus, wiping them with her hair.

Mary, when confronted with the reality of Jesus, who had turned her world upside down by raising her brother from the dead, could only offer her most valuable possession to him out of love. Mary *sees* and *knows* Jesus completely. She somehow knows him more deeply than anyone else and understands what he is about to do. She gives a year's wages, all the while knowing that he is about to die. There is no fear in her love, only perfect acceptance. She does not try to control him, but she anoints him for burial. She chooses to give him the very best gift she had. It is not coerced, and Jesus calls her gift beautiful. He does not demand more or less than she has given, but protects her gift, telling the others to leave her alone. She is seen and defended by Jesus; she does not seek to defend herself. Her actions are costly but bounded, and intimate.

Even knowing that he will die, she does not try to save Jesus. She does not try to *use* Jesus. She simply *sees him—and loves him truly*. She believes in him. Belief is not intellectual agreement. It is not doctrinal alignment. It is relational trust in Jesus, that is all. *Trust* is what our faith is about.

Whereas the Pharisees buckled down to preserve their sterling reputations, Mary tosses hers to the wind, behaving scandalously.

The Pharisees plot his death; Mary prepares him for it.

The Pharisees believe that *we must destroy Jesus to save the people*. Mary understands that *Jesus will give himself to save the people*.

One consumes Jesus for survival. The other honours Jesus in love.

The Pharisees are willing to sacrifice Jesus for the nation. Mary is willing to love Jesus even when the nation will kill him.

The Pharisees do not see or know Jesus. They do not accept him. They see him only as a threat, a potential revolutionary and cause for Roman retaliation. They eliminate him out of fear. They

justify violence for the sake of their nation. They want to snuff him out like a candle flame, presuming that they have the power to kill God.

Then, there is Judas, who, by all outward appearances, looks as if he is the only one who cares about how the money could have been used for the poor. John quickly informs us that, no, Judas was really in it for himself as he stole money from the treasury for himself. Judas sounds so reasonable, but his inner motives are revealed: they are for self-gain. Mary, on the other hand, has no motive but to honour Jesus. That is the difference.

When we offer what we have to Jesus out of a motive to protect ourselves or to make ourselves look better to others, it loses all meaning. This is not the type of worship that Jesus desires. In the book of Hosea, and then later quoted again by Jesus, God says, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”³ The gifts we give to God are *not* about how big or extravagant we can make it. It’s not about appearing holier or more righteous or more Christian. It’s certainly not to make us feel better about ourselves.

It is about Jesus, plain and simple. Mary got that. Judas didn’t.

Now, to be clear, the actions of Mary didn’t earn Jesus’ approval. They were an outpouring of her love for him. The things that we give to God—our time in Scripture and prayer, or in volunteering or community service, or our money, homes, resources, or even our entire lives—*do not earn God’s approval*. We offer these things out of an overflow of love for our wild and untamable Christ, and nothing else.

Mary does not love Jesus to become worthy. She loves Jesus because she already knows who he is, and who he is is Love.

Not a tame Love. No. An overwhelming, never-ending, reckless Love.

Out of her love for Jesus who perfectly loves her, she is not ashamed to bare herself to him. This is not a ploy for attention. She is not afraid of being seen or judged or losing approval from others. She only cares about Jesus, and she is secure in his love for her. She trusts him, because he has shown up for her in her need. She trusts in his goodness, in his *Godness*; she trusts that even death will not keep him trapped, just as death did not trap her brother.

There is no fear in this love, no compulsion, no resentment or exhaustion. It is a mutual, respectful love, a choice to offer oneself to another, honouring the other, and accepting love from another. It is a love that bears the fruit of life, growth, joy, and freedom.

Jesus freely accepts what she gives, and he does not demand more from her. He does not demand that she give it to the poor, who surely could use it more than he could. He accepts it,

³ Hos 6:6, Matt 9:13

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and he accepts her in all her disarray. He does not consume her offering and then demand more, as the pagan gods so liked to do.

It's not about the extravagance of her offering; sometimes, we think we need to do extravagant things to get God's attention and approval, like become an overseas missionary or take a vow of poverty. But no, it is about love for this wild God who does not fit into any box that we create. It is whatever might flow from the outpouring of our love for Jesus, who loves us more abundantly than we can imagine. Mary offered perfume for Jesus' feet; for you, it might be something uniquely from you to Jesus.

He's not a tame God. He is a wild and wonderful God, who cannot be contained. But he is good, and his overflowing, good love *loves you*. This means that he is always moving, always doing something in our lives, if we would but pay attention. If we would listen, we might see that he is working miracles in our midst. We might identify where he is changing hearts and changing our world. Following Jesus is no tame thing; it is a rollercoaster ride, if you are willing to hop on. You can buckle down, dig in, and get rid of him like the Pharisees and Judas, or you can abandon all restraint and love him wildly and recklessly.

Let's pray.