

# "Why Bethany" by Marjory Zoet Bankson

Palm Sunday, April 9, 2006  
A Sermon for Seekers Church  
by Marjory Zoet Bankson

## Why Bethany?

### Scripture:

*Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve." (Mark 11:1-11)*

Getting to church in Takoma is no picnic for those of us in Virginia. Moreover, when a political demonstration or a marathon is scheduled downtown, I generally try to avoid the traffic tie-up...even if the issue is about something I support. As Passover week began in Jerusalem, I wonder how many took notice of the man riding on a donkey, surrounded by a palm-waving crowd shouting "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who come in the name of the Lord!"

Marcus Borg describes Jesus' entry as a planned "political demonstration" during Passover. Other biblical scholars agree. Ordinary people entered Jerusalem on foot through the East Gate. In our scripture for today, Mark tells us that Jesus specifically sent two of his disciples to find a young colt for him to ride into the city. He would have been aware of Zechariah's prophetic words (which Mark quotes), trumpeting a king of peace who would come riding on a donkey. The crowd

would have recognized the connection too.

On the other side of the city, Borg says, Roman guards were marching through the West Gate to reinforce the garrison of soldiers already stationed near Jerusalem. They proclaimed the imperial power of Rome – with their snorting horses, flashing helmets and swords, creaking leather armor and clouds of swirling dust from hundreds of tramping feet. Jewish Passover recalled the bloody ritual of departure from Egypt and it could be a tinderbox for rebels. Roman response would be quick, cruel and thorough. A clash in the crowded streets seems inevitable!

Suddenly, the action halts! Mark writes: *(Jesus) entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.*

## **Why Bethany?**

In the gospel of John, we read that Mary, Martha and Lazarus lived in Bethany. Six days before Passover, Jesus went there for a last supper with his dear friends. Lazarus lay with Jesus at the table, astonished to be free of his grave cloths. Martha served, apparently at ease with her role now. Mary, the shy introverted student of Luke's gospel, broke open a jar of costly nard, poured it over his feet and wiped them with her hair in an extravagant gesture of pure love. Judas tried to spoil the party by snarling that the perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor, but Jesus stopped him, saying, "Leave her alone. She has bought it for the day of my burial..." I imagine the disciples shifted uneasily, miserable with his talk of impending death and embarrassed by Judas.

In the gospel of Mark, which is the one we are using this year, the same scene takes place in Bethany, only this time it's at the home of Simon "the leper," ... a clue that Jesus is once again eating with someone who is unclean according to temple authorities. The dinner probably included his disciples, though they are not mentioned specifically in this version. An unnamed woman breaks in with her jar of costly ointment and pours it over his head this time, taking the sacred power to anoint a king into her own hands. When the same objection is raised about giving the money to the poor, Jesus speaks a little too sharply, nerves on edge: "Let her alone! She has done what she could... anointed my body beforehand for its burial."

Matthew tells virtually the same story. Over the years, preachers have associated this woman with Mary Magdalene, but there is no scriptural evidence for that. She is simply someone who saw what was happening, came with what she had and anointed him for the hard days ahead. She does not wait around for somebody with authority to do it. She "gets" Jesus' message that **everyone** has the power to know, to act, to bless.

Jesus' call-to confront the dominant power system and proclaim God's love for all-would take him to Jerusalem and ultimately, to the cross. However, Bethany is a place to rest, to catch his breath and calm his fear. A place to eat with friends and receive this extravagant gesture of love from a woman he may have known...or not. As an "outsider," this woman acted with courage and clarity while the disciples bickered among themselves, numb to Jesus' need.

## Renewed for Call

In some ways, Bethany reminds me of Seekers. It is not the place where we are called to grapple with whatever particular place of pain or injustice that is ours to tend in the world. It's the place where we come to regroup and remember...to bring our doubts and our fears to the table, hoping to catch sight of God's larger story as it flashes through worship with a word or a song or sometimes the sweet wonder of a child as she lights a candle.

[The Call of Seekers Church](#), which is printed on the back of your bulletin this season, basically says, "Our call is to gather for weekly worship rooted in the biblical faith, and to disperse for service in the structures of our daily lives."

Seekers has **not** been the place of my primary call to service in the world ...but it's been the place where I come to be encouraged, surprised, forgiven, and sometimes even anointed for a terrifying step ahead. Belonging to Seekers can be as simple as reading the call and feeling its resonance in my life and yours. There is no statement of belief to adhere to...no examination or doctrine. You can belong if you want to be intentional about your spiritual journey. As Brenda said last week in her sermon, Seekers has a culture of call and commitment, not programs and paid ministers. In mission groups, we find a smaller circle where we can be known as the flawed human beings that we are ... confess our fears and successes, and share the tasks we have set for ourselves. Sometimes that does not feel like call so much as a voluntary effort to do what needs to be done.

Some are called to carry the life of Seekers as Stewards. You

have heard Margreta's commitment as a Steward today. It is not a secret society or an inner circle. Being a Steward is simply a commitment to listen for God's guidance together... and it is open to anyone who will do the work. The good news for some is that the door to Stewards swings both ways...and when the call to care about the whole community changes, you can step out of Stewards. Margreta has done that too. Ask her about that.

Because my call to [Faith At Work](#) often takes me away on weekends, I was

in Seattle for a women's event when most Seekers gathered for the overnight at Wellspring. As I prayed for all of you from afar, I remembered the last time this kind of upwelling occurred in 1994, when a large number of Seekers participated in four classes at the School: on Belonging, Decision-making, Stewardship and Space. Many of the proposals made then have been implemented. Now we have another opportunity to shape our lives together even as God calls us outward, beyond Seekers, to follow Jesus where his passion for the peaceable kingdom of God takes us.

On the altar today is an unfired burial urn and a painted prayer shawl...symbols of my call into the world right now. They hold my hopes and fears for the tiny ministry of Faith At Work where I have given my energy out of call for the past 20 years. Change there feels radical and scary right now, with Doug moving to Vermont in June and the sudden death of Bill's wife, Susan, two weeks ago. As the only two full-time staff members, they are the core of Faith At Work. Moreover, as we plan for another FAW trip to Guatemala, the ground feels shaky and the sky feels ominous overhead.

This week, gladness broke in when the magazine arrived from

the printer in Nebraska. On the cover was a gift from Seekers: Liz Vail's art on the cover! Like a woman without shame, clad in Liz Vail's bright colors, the magazine carried good news that I needed to read...even though I had put it together myself a month ago. I remembered (again) that **it is God's call, not mine.**

For me, Seekers is a bit like Bethany. It cannot save us from the call to Jerusalem (wherever that is for you). Moreover, it is not a substitute for the hard work of call in the world. However, if you show up here, faint with fear or struggling with doubts that hope can happen, watch for those moments of blessing when someone is standing there, in the shadows, with an outrageous blessing for hard times ahead. It may not be the people that from whom you expect it. The disciples were stuck in their own resistance to what Jesus needed to do but the woman, whoever she saw, just did what she could...and it was enough for Jesus. It can be the same for us.

Amen.

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