

[Readings: Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14; Psalm 116; 1 Cor. 11:23-26; John 13:1-15]

The memorial of Christ we celebrate today, and every time we gather around the table of the Lord, does not leave us or our world unchanged. It continuously transforms us and makes us Christ-like so that when we leave this sacred space we do like him and, “tying a towel around our waist,” we make God’s love visible to others where they – and we -- need it the most.

Certainly we might want to hear God’s voice from above in times of need, but perhaps we long even more for God’s ongoing and active presence in our lives. We feel we need to see the invisible; to touch it and to have it touch us. We read the Old Testament accounts and might wonder why God is not present and visible in the world now as God was thousands of years ago?

Where are the marvelous signs that will lead, guide, and sustain me through life, which at times seem like a captivity, a desert journey, and a moonless midnight? Over 3,000 years ago that was precisely how the Israelites felt because that was their real situation. “Where is that marvelous sign?” they must have asked in their struggle. How can we see and touch and know that God loves us even in our darkest days?

God made His love known to them when they gathered by families in community and celebrated what at its core is a very human event: a meal. Gathered in God’s name, they shared their faith and food, both of them gifts of God. And they did so having marked their homes – and their lives – with blood, the sign of life itself. They were giving themselves to God, placing their lives in God’s hand, filled with the certain hope that God would make Himself known to them. So certain was their hope, that they were ready to go wherever God instructed them because they knew that God would be there with them.

And so it happened on that night. This night. Through a shared meal and a ready heart, their lives changed forever. The promises became reality and God’s love was visible to all. They were liberated from slavery in Egypt and on the road to freedom.

But there remained a different and more powerful captivity. As our Lenten journey helps us remember year after year, our humanity constantly wrestles with the oppression of sin, in our own lives and in the world. We know we are not truly free, as we were created to be, and we ask God to rescue us again. We want that sign that will tell us that we are truly free, truly alive, that “God is with us.”

But at the same we believe -- we know -- that God is with us in Jesus Christ, the very Word of God made flesh. Through Jesus’ life, the Reign of God erupts into the world and becomes real. In him God’s very essence and love become real. It is a love that, as Saint Paul recounts, the Church has celebrated from its very beginning in the Eucharist.

We know, though, that it was more than that. It was a powerfully unique supper. It was when Jesus made God’s love visible in the most profound way: through the breaking of His own body and the pouring of His own blood; a sacrifice we again will celebrate solemnly tomorrow on the second of these three most holy days, a sacrifice that truly destroyed our captivity to sin and death and has cleared for us the way to true freedom and life.

Unlike the other Gospels, John places the last meal with the disciples not on Passover but the evening before, when Jerusalem was preparing lambs for the feast. This circumstance could not have made more of an impact on the disciples: As their Master washed their feet, the sounds of the slaughter of Passover lambs was all over the city. Sacrifice and service, inextricably linked.

Like the blood of the Passover lamb that nourished the Israelites for the journey to freedom, so Christ’s blood gives us new life and victory over evil and death. It continuously transforms us and makes God’s love visible to others by gently touching their lives where they – and we -- need it the most.

We do this tonight with the symbolic washing of feet. We do it when we leave here with the choices to respond to others in need. “As I have done for you, so you must do for others.” Jesus washing the feet of the apostles teaches us about power and humility.

We can never say that we are too good for any act of service to another person. Nothing falls beneath our dignity. No act becomes too unimportant for

us to worry about. Nothing is a waste of our talents. Jesus lays claim on us. That claim is to offer the washing of forgiveness, helping people find the refreshment of release from guilt. We offer the washing of service, cleaning off the dirt of poverty, hunger, suffering, violence, hopelessness and despair.

The Last Supper was the most intimate moment in the life of Jesus. It is the most intimate moment in the life of His Church. This is the night when people who are personally close to Jesus know that He does not want to eat alone. Tonight, of all nights, He wants someone to talk to, someone to be with.

When He gathers His friends into a safe circle of concern, He washes their feet. As a kindness, because they are tired; as a courtesy, because He is their host; as a sign that in the long run, service to them is more to the point than teaching or leading or saving them.

Then He gives them His peace. As a kindness, because they are afraid of the future; as a courtesy, because they are ill at ease; as a sign that physical chaos, psychological insecurity or spiritual turmoil need not override the balm of His presence.

Then He gives them bread and wine. As a kindness, because they are hungry; as a courtesy, because it brought them together; as a sign of His Body and Blood, and a promise that whoever lived in His memory would never die. Tonight, Jesus invites us to His supper. He will serve us, extend His peace to us, and give us His Body and Blood. As a kindness, because we desperately need His peace; as a courtesy, because we are His awkward servants; as a sign, because we need to clean ourselves and each other. AMEN!