

Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Psalms 116:1, 10-17

It's Thursday night. It's the week before Passover in Jerusalem. People and noise and chaos are everywhere. The city is choked with people who have walked a long way to celebrate Passover in the Holy City and worship at the Temple. If you're Jewish in first century Palestine, Jerusalem is the only place to be for this Passover. The sounds of animals in the street and children laughing and men in heated conversation fill the air. So much activity. The air is electric with anticipation. Passover begins tomorrow night at sunset and there are preparations to be made. Passover. God's promise to Israel. God's saving grace upon his people. God heard their cries when they were in bondage in Egypt and God did something about it. God led Moses to lead these chosen people out of bondage and misery. God redeemed them. This then is their remembrance of God's saving act for them.

In our Old Testament lesson we heard the God's instructions to them.....the kind of lamb they were to choose for a sacrifice and how it should be cooked and how it should be eaten and what should be done with the leftovers. The lamb.....offered up to God in sacrifice. And God told them to put the lamb's blood on the two doorposts so that the Angel of Death would pass over them and spare them when all the firstborn in Egypt were struck down. The Passover. God's redemption of Israel. Like so many other Jews in Palestine, Jesus and his disciples have made their way to Jerusalem to celebrate.

Jesus and the 12 disciples have found a place to gather in an upper room to share a meal together at the end of the day. As the sun sets the noise in the streets begins to dim. People are settling in for the evening. The animals are rounded up and the children are fed and put to bed. This is not the day of the Passover. This is the Day of Preparation. Passover begins the next day at sunset. The supper that Jesus and his disciples share is not the Seder, the Passover Meal. That will come tomorrow.

This is a time of Preparation for Jesus and the twelve, too, although not the kind of preparation that the twelve anticipate. Jesus knows what lies ahead. This is the quiet moment that he will spend with those he loves to share with them the last things he wants them to know.

This is a time for saying 'good-bye' although the twelve don't know that. This is a time to cherish these precious last moments of fellowship together. This is the time for Jesus to prepare them for what's coming.....for the dramatic turn of events that is about to happen. This is the time to prepare them for his arrest, for his public show trial, for his torture and humiliation and for his ultimate execution on the cross. This is the time for Jesus' last communion and fellowship with them.....the last meal he will eat with them.....the last words of wisdom he has to share with them. His last opportunity to show them the depths of his love for them.

Sometime between this last gathering in the upper room and sunset the following day, the sacrificial lambs being used to celebrate the Passover will be slaughtered and so, too, will Jesus be slaughtered as a sacrifice for all humanity. God's timing is impeccable. It's no accident that the slaughter of the Paschal Lamb of the Resurrection happens at the same time as the sacrificial lambs for the Passover.

During this last evening together, Jesus does a very odd thing. In the middle of the supper, he gets up from the table, takes off his coat and puts a towel around his waist. And then one by one, he washes the feet of each of those around the table. The gesture bewilders the disciples and offends some of them. No one of equal or greater social standing would ever wash the feet of another. That's a job for a slave to do, not the host of a household or a member of the family. Peter is indignant that Jesus would abase himself in this way. He balks. And Jesus tells him that he can't be any part of Jesus unless he lets Jesus express in this way his own love for each of them. Peter quickly changes his mind. He wants desperately to be a part of Jesus, so he wants Jesus to wash his hands and head, too, not just his feet. Jesus knows that before the night is over, Peter will deny 3 times that he even knows Jesus.....and he tells Peter just that....which Peter knows he will never do. In this profound expression of love and servitude, Jesus covers the denials that Peter is about to make.

The twelve don't know what he is talking about, but they hang on his every word. For some reason, they have the feeling that what he says now is important. What Jesus is saying to them doesn't seem to make sense, but there's something in his voice and his demeanor that holds their attention. He seems to be engraving these words on their hearts. He washes the feet of each one of them.....even the feet of Judas although he knows Judas is the one who is going to betray him. What love Jesus had for Judas. What forgiveness Jesus shows him even before the act is done. Betrayal is a particularly heinous thing. A stranger can turn us over to the authorities, but only someone close to us can betray us.....someone that we love.....someone that we believe loves us.....someone that we trust to have our back. Opening our hearts to someone is risky business. It makes us vulnerable to them. It means that we have given them

the power to wound us mortally if they choose to.....that's what makes betrayal particularly heinous. Knowing what he knows, Jesus washes Judas' feet anyway.

So in this process of washing the disciples feet.....all of the disciples feet.....Jesus has modelled for them and us not only the nature of God, but also the way he wants and expects us to behave with each other. That Jesus loved Judas just as he loved the other disciples is the way that God loves us.....all of us.....flaws and all. Even when we don't deserve it. Even when we can't accept it. In washing his feet, Jesus covered Judas' sin that he had yet to commit.

Jesus gives them this one last commandment: Love one another as I have loved you. Become servants to each other. Wash each other's feet. Care for each other. Share each other's joys and burdens. Love each other. The Latin word for 'commandment' is *mandatum* which is why this particular Thursday in Holy Week is called Maundy Thursday. It is Commandment Thursday. This commandment flies in the face of all the conventional wisdom of the day. Teachers, rabbis and leaders aren't supposed to act like servants.....but that's exactly what Jesus is telling them to do. This is a kind of love and a depth of love that rattles their brains. It's not the way things are and yet, Jesus is telling them that it's the way he wants them to be.....and us, too!

And then Jesus gets very quiet.....almost wistful. He speaks slowly and gently and he tells them 'good-bye.' He talks to them as a loving parent would, "Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.'" Anyone who has ever mourned the death of someone who is part of their daily life, who is part of what makes their heart full, who is central to all that life is....knows that Jesus speaks a truth that the disciples do not comprehend. They *will* look for him. They will long for him. They will look for him repeatedly as their minds keep telling them that what they saw with their own eyes could not possibly have happened. He must be somewhere. We all look for the ones we love until the demands of daily life interfere with our searching and we resign ourselves to the fact that we will not find them in the next room.

In this last quiet moment of intimacy with his disciples, Jesus lays the cornerstone of community. With his disciples he puts he lays the foundation for community.....for what will become his church.....the body of Christ in the world. He tells them that the world will know that they are his disciples by the way they love and care for one another just as he loved and cared for them. This mutuality between believers is the blood and sinew and muscle and tissue that holds the body of Christ together in the world even now. They know that we are Christians by the way that we love.....and forgive.....one another.

As the night darkness sets in, the world around them becomes calm and quiet. After the noisy and chaotic activity of a busy day, the twelve leave the upper room with Jesus. The noise and chaos from the day has moved into their own minds and their own hearts as they try to take in all that Jesus has just done and said. And they contemplate what must lie ahead for Jesus and for them in the next few hours.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.