

Grace Episcopal Church
Maundy Thursday (“All Years”)
March 28, 2024

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our Strength and our Redeemer, Amen.

For what it’s worth, I think the *Revised Common Lectionary* gets it right tonight. The lectionary gets it right when it assigns the lessons and the psalm we just heard and sang. Those lessons and that psalm allowed us to contemplate the truth of our worship this evening. They are the primary scriptural witnesses to the core Christian doctrines that shape and are shaped by our Holy Thursday liturgy. I’ll summarize those teachings and then we’ll continue the liturgy.

First of all, tonight we commemorate our Lord’s entry into his paschal victory. Tonight we begin our corporate realization of the fact that Jesus did more than live a good life and leave us an example of how we might live good lives also. Jesus carried out his own personal Passover. During the week that we are commemorating this week, Jesus did his own passing over. What does *that* mean? Well the Old Testament lesson that Kristy just read for us helps us to grasp what it means. It suggests the significance and implications of the fact that Jesus carried out his own personal Passover by informing us about the original Passover, the one that our Hebrew predecessors lived and then instituted as part of their own liturgical life. And that passage tells us what their Passover meant to them. We heard how the Children of Israel were liberated from bondage in Egypt by God’s mighty and faithful action. And how they ritualized that act of liberation into an annual festival.

The Old Testament lesson tonight provides the cultural and liturgical context we need to make sense of the series of acts that Jesus began on that Thursday evening just before he was crucified. It also helps us grasp what we’re doing tonight. We come to understand Jesus’s Passover by contemplating Israel’s Passover. Both required sacrifice, bloodshed. Both involved passages from bondage to freedom, from death to life. And both made salvation available to others who came afterwards. Exodus 12 effectively grounds and rightly guides our contemplation, our fuller comprehension of Maundy Thursday.

Also, on the night before he died for us, the night that turned out to be the first Holy Thursday, our Lord Jesus took bread and wine during a meal with his friends. He thanked God for the bread and the wine, and then he gave them to his friends and said, “Consume these. They are my body and blood given for you.” During that final meal together, Jesus linked his own coming death with God’s constant, faithful will-to-save. Sarah read what might be the first recorded commentary on that linkage, from Paul’s letter to the church at Corinth. On the very first Maundy Thursday evening, Jesus instituted the eucharistic meal. He told his friends to celebrate it remembering him, and that by doing so they would proclaim his sacrificial death until he comes again. The church’s sacrificial remembrance meal was born on that Holy Thursday long ago, a meal that is more than that but certainly not less than that.

Third, and finally, as we heard in the gospel lesson tonight, Jesus stood up in the middle of that same meal, tied a towel around his waist, and then washed his friends’ feet. It was an outrageous thing to do, their master acting like a servant! By washing their feet, Jesus demonstrated yet again what true humility looks like. He modeled the very heart of his life-message for those around the table; he’d been trying to teach that life-message to them for years.

After Jesus washed his friends’ feet, he explained to them what he had done. He always did that: Holy action followed by explanation; experience then exposition; life then lesson—it’s the “Jesus way.” He started with a question: “Do you guys understand what I just did? Do you get it? You call me ‘master,’ and you’re right to do that, because that’s who I am. But if I’m the master and you’re the disciples, and

yet just now I humbled myself and washed your feet, shouldn't you also do the same thing for each other? Shouldn't you, as my students, do what I do, even though it's totally contrary to what teachers usually do with their students?" To make sure they learned the lesson, Jesus gave them a new commandment. And that's why we call today Maundy Thursday — *maundy* is an old word related to the word *mandate*. Jesus gave his friends a new mandate based on what he had just done for them in servant humility. He told them: "Love one another!" "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another!"

So here's a final reminder, and then we'll get back to our worship. I said it earlier: the lessons assigned for tonight by the *Revised Common Lectionary* help us to understand Jesus's own personal Passover. But our understanding is not the whole story. Understanding is never the whole story. The lessons this evening help us understand Jesus's death. They remind us how he instituted our sacrificial, memorial, eucharistic meal. And they contain his example of humility, and his new commandment that we love one another. But all this grasping and remembering and modeling, and all the understanding and celebrating and humble loving that we do ourselves tonight — all of it constitutes only part of what is happening tonight. We are not merely remembering and celebrating Jesus's entry into his own Passover victory. We are actively entering with him into that victory. Through this Maundy Thursday worship, with its lessons and its foot-washing and its meal, we who make up the body of Christ are joining him in his victory. This is how we do it. We hear about it; we gather around and partake; we demonstrate our love by kneeling and washing each others' feet. And then we'll leave this place and exercise obedience to the new commandment. Maybe a better way to say it is that everything we are doing here tonight is a means to an end, and end is joining our Lord in his passage from death to resurrection for the life for the world. That joining is our salvation. Amen.