

Maundy Thursday, 1 April 2021
Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa
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[Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14; Psalm 116:1,10-17; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35]

Tonight, we remember the Israelites in Egypt, more than three thousand years ago. They were on the threshold of departure. The journey would be much longer and more complicated and costly than they could have imagined—40 years worth of journeying in the desert. We hear from Scripture how weary and cranky they became, repeatedly, along the journey. I imagine they were tired before they even set out, worn out by the hard labor of their enslavement under Pharaoh.

And here we are. Our second Covid Holy Week, and now this evening we begin our second Covid Triduum, the Three Great Days. Unlike our first Covid Maundy Thursday, we are able—some of us, at least—to gather in person, to celebrate the Eucharist tonight, and it seems fitting, given the experience of the last year, that we are celebrating tonight in hybrid style, those joining online via Zoom and Facebook, and many of those joining us online will be able to participate with us in the Holy Communion, partaking of gifts set aside from our Palm Sunday celebration.

So, how are you? What has this past year been like, for you? Where to start, right? For all of us, I dare say, it's been a departure, and journey. How has the journey been, for you? How are you doing? And what has changed in you over this last year? For my part, I am pretty exhausted, emotionally. How have I changed? I'm not sure yet. I feel I won't know, really until we arrive at whatever the "new normal" turns out to be, but I'll be different.

So, this past year has been a departure, and perhaps made it clearer than usual that we are indeed and always on a journey, a journey in which both our surroundings and we ourselves are changing. This year, it's perhaps easier than usual to say that we are in the midst of a departure, on a journey toward

a future that will be different, and that we *want* to be different, from the "normal" of the past.

The word *exodus* means "departure." And as for the Israelites, on the eve of their departure, God gave them sustenance, God gave them a feast, God gave them Passover. A somewhat strange feast, admittedly, with somewhat strange instructions. Yay for the roast lamb, but what's this about the insistence that they eat it with belts fastened, shoes on their feet, staffs in their hands? And to eat in haste? All those things are the opposite of what you'd expect for a festive, celebratory meal. That's when you should loosen your belt, kick off your shoes, and, perhaps especially, relax, take your time. And eating with a staff in hand? That has got to be awkward, especially if you're supposed to be eating quickly, passing the matzoh, and what if your lamb hasn't been cut into bite size pieces? Surely there were those who said, "Why the hell are we doing this?", a question that was refined over the generations to become "Why is this night different from all other nights?"

But this meal was not just a meal. It was a *sign*. They were being instructed to enact a *sign*, a representation of what God was doing, or of what God's view of things was: this meal was all about departure, and about a journey; exhausted as they already were, God was setting them on a departure and a journey to freedom. A journey that continues, for us, today.

Fast forward twelve centuries, more or less, from that exodus, and Passover had become a pilgrimage festival, one the several occasions in the year when the descendants of those slaves-on-the-verge-of-liberation would converge on Jerusalem and its Temple for the feast. And over those centuries there had been many prophets to guide, admonish, and (sometimes) console the people, and among the

things those prophets would do was to perform *signs*. God would instruct a prophet to do some unusual, unexpected, strange things: behaviors designed to provoke the question: “What the *hell* is that supposed to mean?” In Jeremiah, for example, there’s a sign involving dirty underwear (the Bible is so much more interesting than many people think!); not exactly the way people expect God to speak to them, then or now, but God speaks in the unexpected and in the ordinary. Ordinary like bread, wine, a basin of water. And tired, dusty feet.

Yes, Jesus, especially as the Gospel of John portrays him, is all about signs. The other Gospels call Jesus’s miracles “feats of power”; in John, they are called *signs*. They *say* something, they *point to* something (or Someone), they *represent* or *announce* something we are meant to understand about God and about ourselves. But it’s not just the miracles that are signs.

It *is* not normal, and it *was* not normal, for someone to pass you the bread at dinner and say, “this is my body,” or to offer you a sip from a glass of wine saying, “This is my blood.” Especially that last part, for a faithful Jew, because Torah forbade the consumption of blood. And again, it *is* not normal, and it *was* not normal for the presiding host of a meal, say a teacher hosting their students for dinner, to get up in the middle of the meal and start washing the students’ feet. All of this was a departure from the expected routine. One can imagine the question in a disciple’s mind: “Why the hell is he doing this?” The Passover was already a sign, and tonight Jesus, seeing what is coming on this festival of freedom, audaciously improvises signs on top of signs: *this* is what is happening here, *this* is what God is doing: here’s the picture; there is a *departure* happening here.

From Paul, in First Corinthians, we hear tonight an account very similar to what is reported in Mark, Matthew, and Luke, about Jesus speaking those startling words as he passes the bread and the cup; and John shows us Jesus rising from the table to bow down before each of his disciples in turn, to wash their feet, the task of a slave. Jesus is improvising these signs to show his disciples what is actually happening, especially in what is *about to*

happen *to him*. Perhaps think of it this way: Maundy Thursday gives us Jesus’s *interpretation* of Good Friday. And maybe the first thing to note is simply that Jesus is *active* here, and he is free, spontaneously enacting these signs of departure.

So I think the first thing Jesus is saying is this: what is happening here, what is about to happen to me, is not just happening *to me*. No: I am *doing* something, *God* is *doing* something. I am giving myself for you and to you, so that my life, my freedom, my being, *who I am*, will live inside of you, nourish you, feed you, strengthen you, refresh you, free you, *become* you. And this means that *God* is giving Godself for you and to you, so that God’s life, God’s freedom, God’s being, *who God is*, will live inside of you, nourish you, feed you, strengthen you, refresh you, free you, *become* you. *This* will be your departure and your journey into freedom, into life.

And this, too, is the departure and the journey: Love one another, as I have loved you. Now *you* will become the sign.

There’s a fairly pervasive notion in Western Christianity that Jesus dies to appease the wrath of God the Father, that God looks on approvingly from a distance as Jesus offers himself for our sins, so that then and only then God can bring himself to forgive us. I sometimes think that the Gospel of John was written specifically to dispel, discredit, defeat, and denounce such theology. Again and again, John’s Gospel insists that there is no such distance and no such difference between Jesus and his Father. As Jesus says to Philip at the Last Supper: “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” (John 14:9) And much earlier in John, Jesus says, “Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise.” (John 5:19) This is never more true than at the supper, never more true than in the giving of the bread and the cup, never more true than in the footwashing... and never more true than at Golgotha.

Whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. This is exactly what God looks like. Tonight and tomorrow, above all, Jesus is showing us *who* God is, *how* God is, what God is doing: humbly washing our feet, pouring out God's own life for us, so that God will live in us, and we in God, and so that we may love one another as God loves us.

Imagine the world if all understood that *this* is who God is. That would be a departure, an exodus.

Jesus, kneeling before Peter to wash his feet, Peter refusing: this is the story of God and humanity from the beginning until now. We cling to another God, a God of control, a God of superiority, a God of exclusion, a God who must be pleased, or else. But that's *us*, not God.

Peter, in his resistance, becomes part of the sign, he shows *us* who *we* are, what *we* are doing, again and again, to ourselves, to one another, and to God, resisting God's humility and generosity, insisting on a world of domination and scarcity, of haves and have nots, of insiders and outsiders, the deserving and the undeserving, the powerful and the powerless, while the God who is truly God kneels before us to wash our feet, pouring out God's own infinite life for our sustenance, our freedom, our joy, and calling us to that same pattern of self-outpouring love: Love one another as I have loved you. Going forward, *that* will be the sign.

"Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." And now, Jesus hands it over to us: now *we* are to be the sign.

Jesus, washing our feet; Jesus, giving himself for our sustenance and joy; Jesus, hanging on the cross; these are the most powerful signs, the clearest pictures we will ever have of who God is, of *how* God is, of what God is doing, of what God is like.

Tonight, whether or not we literally wash feet or have ours washed, the creator of the universe bows down before us to wash us, God gives God's own being, God's own infinite life, to feed us, to refresh us, pouring God's own self-giving life into us, so that now we may become the sign of who God is, of

what God is doing, loving others as we are loved, the sign of a departure, and a journey into freedom, into life, into joy.

Imagine. Imagine the world, if all the world understood that *this* is who God is.