

Reflection on Movement from Maundy Thursday to Good Friday

I.) Maundy Thursday is the day during Holy Week in which we remember the night Jesus gathered in the Upper Room with his disciples—washed their feet—and gave them a new commandment to love one another as he had loved them. He said one of them would betray him and one would deny him—and then he transformed the Passover meal into a communion of his own body and blood to be done in remembrance of him. Once the meal was finished, scripture says that they sang a hymn; then they left the room—left Jerusalem and went outside the city walls to the Mount of Olives. There Jesus would pray in the evening shadows while within a few hours, soldiers, led by Judas, would come to arrest him. In the early hours of the next day, Jesus would be tried by the religious leaders. Then he'd endure the central events of Good Friday itself—the trial before Pilate, the whipping, humiliation, and crucifixion outside the city wall; a tragic death and a hurried burial in a borrowed tomb as the sun set.

II.) But going back to Maundy Thursday, what scripture doesn't tell us is what happened in that upper room once Jesus and the disciples left. The Passover meal was complete. Dishes and goblets would have to be cleared away and washed up. The floor would have been swept; the furniture put back the way it was before this large group of 13 had crowded together around a long table. Perhaps it was the homeowner's family who did this work. Perhaps it was servants. None of them in the house knew what was about to happen among the trees on the Mount of Olives. To them, it was simply the end of another year's Passover celebration—that familiar story of slavery in Egypt and God's liberating power—a story of deliverance told over unleavened bread, salty water, spiced fruit, and cups of wine.

III.) It is worth remembering that even in moments of the mundane, the wonder and power of God is close at hand. A house was opened to Jesus of Nazareth and his followers, yet in that same moment it hosted the Son of God and the beginnings of the church universal. Plates and goblets would be left behind to be washed and put away; but they would be the utensils that held the first communion bread and wine. Even in what is mundane, the miraculous is close at hand.

IV.) During this season of home-isolation, of acts done repetitively day after day as we move around the restricted spaces at home, think about the Upper Room made sacred by Jesus' presence. Think about the utensils and cutlery used for the first communion that would be returned back to common use in that home. All of that was part of God's plan then—and is part of God's plan for us in our own lives. We'll talk more about this in a moment. For now, let's first hear J. S. Bach's beautiful arrangement of the tune we know as "O Sacred Head Sore Wounded," followed by hearing the gospel description of Jesus' crucifixion and death on Good Friday afternoon.

HOMILY

I.) Earlier I invited us to think about the Upper Room in which Jesus and his disciples had their Last Supper—and how, after they left to go to the Mount of Olives, someone

had to straighten up the space; clean the table, wash the dishes, put things back in their regular places. The mundane and the miraculous side by side in the same space.

II.) A moment ago, I read from Luke 23 about the righteous man Joseph of Arimathea, who went to Pilate and asked permission to take Jesus down from the cross and bury his body. As it was almost sundown, Jewish law forbade work on the Sabbath, so when Joseph received permission from Pilate, he and the others had to act quickly. Scripture describes how Jesus was placed in a new rock-hewn tomb, and the grave was sealed with a stone. The women disciples saw all this happen and memorized the location so they could return there after the Sabbath to finish the necessary burial rituals.

III.) But once again, scripture is almost silent about what happened immediately after Jesus was laid in Joseph's tomb. It only says that his followers "rested on the Sabbath according to the commandment—to the Jewish laws of Moses." It had already been a terrible, sorrowful day. The disciples had witnessed Jesus' unjust trial and barbaric crucifixion. The women and others had endured those hours on the cross and heard Jesus' final words, before his torture ended and his body could be laid to rest. As darkness fell, there was nothing more for them to do except go home. So that's what they did—to observe the Sabbath and "rest according to the commandment."

IV.) It is interesting to speculate what that Sabbath ritual at home might have felt like for the heartbroken followers of Jesus. They would have gone through the motions of the Sabbath service and hopefully found comfort in the familiar acts of piety. They would have brought out water, bread, wine and candles. Two candles would have been lit at sundown—because the commandment has two parts to it: To remember and to keep the Sabbath.

a. Next they would have said the opening prayer: *Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu, melekh ha-olam—Blessed are you, O Lord our God, sovereign of the universe, who has sanctified us with your commandments and commanded us to light the lights of Shabbat/of Sabbath.*

V.) After lighting the candles, they would have next said the Sabbath prayer – the Kiddush – usually spoken while lifting up a glass of wine:

Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu, melekh ha-olam: And on the seventh day God completed God's work and rested on the seventh day from all the work God had done. And God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it God rested from God's work...Blessed are you who makes the fruit of the vine and through whose word all things exist. Blessed are you who sanctifies Shabbat. Amen.

VI.) After that, the ritual is to wash one's hands. It's such a common thing that we do every day—especially in these difficult days of the coronavirus—but it's something that goes back thousands of years and is a part of the Sabbath worship of God. Water is poured over one hand, then the other; then both hands are dried with a towel.

a. The last element is the blessing of bread. *Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu, melekh ha-olam; Blessed are you Lord, our God, sovereign of the universe; who brings forth bread from the earth. Amen.*

b. The bread is torn and shared and eaten. The Sabbath, the day of rest, has been blessed and the evening meal can begin.

VII.) It is a quite simple ritual. I cannot imagine what was going through the women and men disciples' minds as they took part in this Sabbath ritual so soon after witnessing Jesus' death. In times of extreme grief and shock, it is common to take comfort in the familiar—in the mundane acts we so often do without thinking. Yes, there are daily deaths and losses – yet our life does go on. And thankfully there are candles to be lit against the darkness; wine to be poured as a blessing; and bread to nourish our bodies.

VIII.) Just as the in-between days from Good Friday to Easter feel different and hollow, we are living in similar in-between times right now. I've certainly felt it this year. All our routines are disrupted. Things we value have been lost—personal contact, workplace satisfactions; we worry about loved ones who are ill, at risk, and we grieve those who have perished from the coronavirus. Yet we have to go through in-between times to get where we want to be.

a. Someone wisely once said, "Running very slowly while crying is still moving forward." We put one foot in front of the other. We clear dishes, wash and put them away, until it is time to take them out again. We light candles as the sun sets; we lift a glass of wine, wash our hands yet again, and break the bread so that all can eat a piece. Over and over again - the mundane and the miraculous exist side by side. There is so much comfort in the familiar because God has promised to be right here with us. Always. *Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu, melekh ha-olam.*

b. All our lives are different now. Homes are schools, offices, and places of isolation. Uncertainty marks more of our daily lives than we are comfortable with. And we wait for so much – to re-emerge, to trust what we touch and whom we're beside, to be at peace. My invitation to you for this very night is to open your eyes to the presence of heaven in your midst, the mundane and the miraculous that is right here. For God is near. Jesus is Lord. A time is waiting is upon us, but it is not a long time. Not long at all. For life is stronger than death; hope is stronger than despair; and in Christ there's a love that will not let us go.

Thanks be to God.