

Maundy Thursday
All Saints' Church

April 18, 2019
Year C

Exodus 12:1-14
Psalm 116:1, 10-17

1 Corinthians 11:23-26
John 13:1-17, 31b-35

From Hymn 313: "Thou didst give thyself for us; we pray now to give ourselves to Thee."

We begin tonight in Egypt.

If we let the Scripture have its way with us, then we become "those" people in Egypt who are enslaved. Imagine yourself there in Goshen, at the edge of the Nile, hungry, hurting and afraid. We are in chains. We are slaves.

We are the Hebrews, ancestors of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We are a people trying to believe in one Lord, one God, one Almighty Creator who is our Sustainer and our Liberator.

Yet, we are also a people under the ruling sword of Pharaoh with his mighty army. And we are Pharaoh's slaves. We belong to him, and we are beaten and broken, with calloused hands, empty stomachs, and bent backs.

And as his slaves, there is no way out. Unless by miracle.

We are listening. We have been told to feast under the guidance of a ritualized meal, so that we will remember this night forever. Why?

Because this night is going to become a holy night.

We are all hiding under the bloody lintels of our doors, hoping and praying for freedom. Will the Angel of Death pass over us and strike terror into our Enslaver? Will we really be shown the way out and escape the mighty power of Pharaoh and his legion of armies? Will the Lord really deliver us from our bondage?

My Jewish friends tell me that the root of the word Egypt means a "tight place," a "narrow place," a place, which is "binding." Of course it is.... Egypt represents slavery and death. Yet, the Lord is moving us out of this constricted place to a place of freedom.... This is the miracle.

The Lord is moving us from the tight, binding, claustrophobic place of guilt to forgiveness, from fear to love, from scarcity to abundance, from addiction to health, from silence to a voice, from death to life. From a No, no, no to a Yes, yes, yes.

The Exodus. Not just a Jewish story. Tonight, we are invited to be under the bloody lintels all over the world, where people across the nations gather in fear and anxiety. We are invited to be inside their houses, as well, to feel their fear, and their anxiety, and their need for protection.

Think of all the ways you worry, are confused, and are frightened. Maybe you feel unsafe. We are invited to lift up our own “narrow places” in solidarity with all those throughout the world who are suffering.

What will it be like to witness again the signs and wonders of a miracle?

Will we be able to turn away from our own tricky magicians who tempt us to think of freedom in terms of authoritative power, money, prestige, glamour, exclusion and success and safety at the expense of others?

Or will we trust in God whose longing for us is so great, God will do anything to wrest us away from the suffocation of our own tight thinking, our own little places, to the freedom and glory of who God intends us to be?

Notice tonight that the disciples are also in their tight place... so tight. Judas is about to betray. Peter is about to deny. James and John won't be able to keep awake. And the others, all of them, will forsake Jesus at his hour of greatest need.

Clueless about their pending betrayal, they are gathered at Jesus' table, celebrating and reclining with drink and food, imagining all the ways their dreams will be fulfilled. They don't understand Jesus. They have closed their ears and their hearts to his message.

And they have lifted up their own magicians who are masquerading as the Real Thing, magicians of the trade, who keep tempting our dear disciples with visions of grandeur, power, and might. They are on Pharaoh's side and glad for it.

Because really???? Jesus!!!! does love and forgiveness and grace and beauty actually run the world? No way.

The Chinese say that the tongue is like a sharp knife that can even kill without drawing blood. The disciples are talking a lot, worried about who is going to betray Jesus: “Not I, dear Lord.” How can they not see? It's so clear: all of them are betraying Jesus, all of them.... and this time, their tongues will draw blood.

Imagine, each one takes the bread and the wine and rests this precious gift on their tongues, yet none of them understand. They receive the bread and the wine without fully tasting it.

And what is Jesus' response to his inner circle, knowing all of their fears and little egos, their resentments and their arrogance? What is his response to his friends, who have disappointed him over and over again?

He doesn't chastise, scold, punish, admonish, cajole, brow beat, or find a different crowd. I don't even think he sighs.

He gets up from the table, takes a basin, strips down to his underwear, down to his essence, his vulnerability, his humanity, his manhood, his love, his exposed self, and ties a towel around himself.

Then he pours water into a basin and begins to wash gently all the ugliness of each one of the disciples away, over and over again.

And this night Jesus is inviting us to wash our own ugliness as well, lovingly touching us, washing us, and cleansing us. Jesus knows that we will reject his gift. But it doesn't matter.

Jesus is Jesus. He continues to love, as he points to the real freedom, inviting us to leave our tight places that are binding us to the magicians of the trade, who tempt us to think that something other than Jesus' Way is the way.

What tools does Jesus leave us with? A towel, a basin and water so that we too can do the work of the servant. We will pick them up later. Later, after this horrific ordeal we are about to go through, all by our own hand, is over.

But there is hope. There is salvation. There is freedom. This is our commandment, which is the root of the word Maundy, a mandate to love and to serve the soiled dimensions of humanity, all of it, and to know that the mighty power of God resides in the very fiber of our lives, on our tongues and in our hearts by God's love for us.

Tonight, Jesus will be taken away from us, to be executed, and we will be bereft.

In our sorrow, we are called to remember Jesus' words: "I will be back and take you to myself forever. You will have my presence always. And no one can take that away, never, ever.

"And in your steps, in your touch, in your reach, in your capacity to give, you will join me as The Christ, the Body given to the world not to be served, but to serve."

Amen.