

Maundy Thursday 2018, March 29, 2018, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

A lamb. A loaf of bread. A cup of wine. A basin of water. A towel. Ordinary items made holy by the events of this night and the next several days.

Jesus and his disciples gather to celebrate the Passover. Passover was, and still is, the defining moment of Jewish identity. On the night of Passover God rescued the people Israel from slavery in Egypt. The life of a lamb was sacrificed for a dual purpose. Its blood smeared on the doorposts of a Jewish household served as a sign for the angel of death to pass over this house on its life-destroying errand of all the first born in the land of Egypt. The lamb, roasted whole, was to feed the whole family on the first night of what was to become a long and arduous journey to a land of promise. From the earliest days until today the Passover is celebrated each year. Jesus and his disciples, all observant Jews, sat down to remember the night God rescued Israel from slavery and bondage. Jews to this day do the same, starting tomorrow; the Jewish Passover coinciding as it often does with Christian Holy Week. Two historic faiths connected in event and story; God's plan of liberation and salvation.

The events begun just four days before are moving to their conclusion. At the beginning of the week Jesus rode into the holy city of Jerusalem to the triumphant shouts of the people. He rode on the back of a donkey, a rich symbol steeped in ancient prophesy. It was said the Messiah, the future king of Israel would ride into the holy city on a donkey. On the other side of Jerusalem, into another city gate the Roman legion most likely also entered as a show of force. They were occupiers and overlords of an oppressed people who longed for a return to the freedom they once knew when God rescued them from Egypt. Jesus sensed the inevitable showdown. The shouts of victory as he entered Jerusalem were about to give way to other, more menacing shouts.

So, on one last night with his disciples, he sat down to supper. This was their custom. They often ate together. Indeed, throughout his ministry Jesus gained a reputation as one who was just a bit too extravagant, just a bit too generous with the company he kept and the times he ate with others. "Too many sinners sit at his table," grumbled the leaders. Too many of the wrong people with shady pasts. Now on this last night, as the plot moved towards its inevitable conclusion, Jesus did what he often did. He took a loaf of bread and gave thanks to God. He broke it and gave it to his disciples. He took a cup of wine, gave thanks and passed it among them to drink. Tonight, though, he offered something new, something they had not heard before. "This loaf of bread is my body. This cup of wine is the new covenant in my blood. Do this in remembrance of me."

Then, according to the gospel of John, Jesus got up from this meal, wrapped a towel around his waist and began to wash the feet of these same disciples. Nothing really extraordinary about a foot washing. Go to the home of a friend for dinner, a servant greeted you at the door and washed your feet. Not for the host, or the leader, or the one in charge; this was servant work, slave work. Like eating with the wrong people, stooping to wash the feet of his followers sent a powerful message, more powerful than mere words alone. Here is love, servant-like love. embodied in serving one another.

We don't know what the disciples' reaction was to these strange words and strange actions. We don't even know how much they understood what was happening in these highly charged days. Did they know Jesus was about to be put on trial, condemned to death and be crucified? Did they think the sounds of revolution and freedom were in the air? Did they

understand that God was about to do a new thing, to work a new Passover and Exodus, this time not just for the Jews but for the whole world?

Whether they understood or not at the moment we don't really know. But they remembered. They remembered this event and these words. Long after the crucifixion and resurrection and ascension to the right hand of the Father they continued to gather, to eat with one another, to share a loaf of bread and cup of wine as he instructed them to do. They gave thanks to God as he had done. They passed the loaf around, they drank from the cup and they remembered his words of promise. God made his covenant with Israel in the Passover. And now God made a new covenant through the death and resurrection of his Son Jesus. Each time they gathered and celebrated this meal of remembrance and new covenant they believed he was with them. He was there. He had not left them, but continued, continues, to dine with them in this meal of promise.

Tonight we remember. We remember how it all began. And how it all ended. Tonight is the "night when he was betrayed," and everything came to its horrible and tragic conclusion. We remember the sorrow, the betrayal, the denials. We remember the thief's words to Jesus on the cross, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom."

And in our remembering, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again in glory. Tonight we remember God's new Passover, God's new Exodus. God rescues, not just a nation, but the whole world. We pass from death to life. Amen. Come Lord Jesus, be our guest. Amen.