



SERMON

A Participatory Atonement

Maundy Thursday has always been one of my favorite services of the church year, I think because of the impression it made on me when I first became an Episcopalian when I was 19 or 20 years old. All the beautiful traditions we observe tonight, the stripping of the altar, the poignant juxtaposition of deep joy and great sadness that comes so quickly when supper is over. And also, the foot washing: it reminds me of my childhood. The Pentecostal church I grew up in only had communion once or twice a year, but always, always, when we celebrated the Lord's Supper we included the foot washing. So the washing of feet part doesn't bother me the way it seems to for some Episcopalians I know. Present company excluded, of course.

Tonight we join Jesus and his disciples as they gather around the passover table. John's Gospel imagines this meal unfolding at a leisurely pace: it begins with Jesus ritually washing his disciple's feet, to show them how they should love one another. Then, as the meal goes on, Jesus and his disciples recline around the table, and Jesus teaches them: about love, about sacrifice, about truth. John has Jesus go on in this way for five chapters in fact, before they finally depart for the garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus will be arrested.

I'm always struck by the contrast between this leisurely passover observance, and the instructions God gave to Moses for the first passover – which we heard tonight from the book of Exodus. God is about to end Pharaoh's reign of terror and bring his suffering people out of Egypt. And they have to eat this meal packed up and ready to go, because in the morning comes freedom. God tells them: "[You] shall eat the lamb . . . roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. . . . You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the LORD."

Tonight we are called to share this passover meal, and to learn what it means when we say that Christ has become our passover.

But first, for any of this to make sense, there's something you need to remember: you must remember that you were slaves in Egypt. Our Jewish friends will hear those words tomorrow night at the first seder of passover, and be told that they should never forget the way they were held in bondage by Pharaoh. The Egyptians broke their backs with hard labor and nearly killed their hope. But God heard their cry and sent Moses to bring them out of Egypt.

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DATE

Maundy Thursday
Thursday, April 18, 2019

PREACHER

The Rev. Jason Cox

The Jewish people are our ancestors in faith. This was Jesus' story, and so this story is our story as well: we were slaves in Egypt. Maybe we still are.

Lent is a time for reflection and repentance. Over these past few weeks, have you thought about the ways you've missed the mark? The ways you've failed to live as a free child of God? You think you are free, but think about this: how are you held in bondage to the ways of the world – those taken for granted assumptions we all share about the way the world works? It's hard to turn our backs on sin when we can't even see the chains that bind us: greed, lies, hypocrisy. Love of power. Love of money. Love of comfort. We turn aside from the suffering we see around us because doing something about it would be too costly, or too uncomfortable. And to be honest, we want to hold on to our own place in the scheme of things.

But these are the lies that Egypt tells us. Egypt is the great Hebrew bible symbol for the ways of the world, the unequal kingdom of economic exploitation that constitutes our daily lives. Our slavemasters want us to believe that we are dependant on them, that we're weak, that we can't change, that we'll never get free, that we'll never make a real difference. And sometimes we believe their lies; and sometimes we even collaborate and make excuses for the slavemaster.

The slavemaster has changed names over the years, but he's always there. First it was Egypt, then Babylon. In Jesus' day it was the power of Rome. Usually it's wherever the money and the power is – that's where enslavement begins. Where is that, in your own life? Whatever or whoever is holding you in bondage tonight – get ready. Because chains are about to be broken.

We're about to sit down to our last supper in the land of Egypt, our last supper in bondage. And this meal we share together tonight is also our first taste of freedom. The food that Jesus sets on this table is food for the journey ahead, and there is enough bread to go around. Enough bread for everyone who is hungry, in fact. God is about to lead us out: out of Egypt, out of bondage. So get ready. Gird your loins; get your walking shoes on. Because tonight we are going to the promised land. Tonight we are marching to Zion. And we will be slaves no longer, but brothers and sisters, children of our heavenly father, and free citizens of the beautiful city of God.

Tonight we pass over from slavery to freedom, from darkness to light, from death to life. Now I'm not going to lie to you friends. The path ahead leads straight up Calvary's hill, and the way to freedom lies on the other side of the cross. That's the point: we have to die to old ways of being, old ways of thinking, old ways of doing, so that we can be born to new ways.

And notice that I said we have to die: for this is not a substitutionary atonement – Jesus' way is a participatory atonement. This is not Christ going in our place, instead of us. No. Christ has opened the door to new life, but we've got to walk through. Jesus has walked the way ahead of us, but we must follow. And the way Jesus shows us is the way of servanthood, the way that puts the other first, that kneels down to wash the feet of the poor and unloved, the beautiful feet of those who don't even have shoes.

In a moment we will be invited to follow the example of our true master and wash one another's feet. Does the thought of that you a little uncomfortable? Well, good. I think it's supposed to. My friend Liz Harlan-Ferlo wrote about this when she was the chaplain at Oregon Episcopal School in Portland : "I am no fan of this Maundy Thursday [foot washing], in part because it is, as the kids would say, super awkward. While the religious adherent in me feels uncomfortable, the religion scholar in me approves. Not just because of the slight dis-ease, but of the physicality of it. Rituals should involve a little risk, a little physical participation."

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Only those who are willing to risk it are going to make it through to freedom. Think of what Jesus is about to risk for the truth of God's love. Are we brave enough to risk it, and follow him?

Tonight, as our passover begins, Jesus is calling us to start our journey from bondage to freedom, through death to new life. We will no longer be slaves in Egypt. God's kingdom is near, and tonight we are marching to Zion. Our call is peace. Our drumbeat is justice. And they will know we are Christians by the way we love one another, and the way we share that love with the world out there that God has come to save. Amen.