

“Getting Ready”  
Sermon for Maundy Thursday  
April 1, 2010 – The Rev. Torrence Harman  
Exodus 12:1-14; Psalm 116:1, 10-17; 1 Cor. 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35

It is the evening before the Passover. It is a time of preparation for what is to be remembered year after year.

Jews are to act out, year after year, even centuries after the event, the night of the Passover, a night of preparation, a night when death stalked the streets and alleyways of Egypt. On the night of the Passover in Egypt a lamb was slain for the household, its blood smeared on the lintel and door posts of each home – so that death would pass by those inside. The flesh of the lamb was to be cooked, handled a certain prescribed way. The bread was to be unleavened – because time was of the essence. Deliverance - out of bondage, out of slavery, out of Egypt would begin the next morning. Do this, do this, in remembrance. It is the night before you are to be delivered.

Centuries later in Jerusalem Jesus gathers his disciples in an upper room. They are to celebrate the Passover, share a last meal to remember the night before deliverance, when death will pass them by. Did they touch the doorpost of the house as they entered, thinking back, imagining blood smeared on the long ago door posts of their ancestors? Did they eat the bread this night, recognizing that there was something different about it? Were they prepared to consider the wine in the cup as the blood, the bread as body – both symbols, preparing them for deliverance? “Why is this night different from all other nights?” Was the Seder question even considered as they jostled one another for seats at the table?

The long ago evening in Egypt, the supper in an upper room centuries later in Jerusalem: What do they have in common?

They are both nights of preparation for what is to come. They are both “last meals.” They are both nights to remember. They are both nights that have to do with death. They both hold the promise of a new way of life, of a new life, beyond bondage. Both involve a lamb to be slain – that God’s people might have life. Both involve blood and bread.

On a long ago night in Egypt the people to be delivered were to gird their loins and put sandals on their feet. They were to eat hurriedly. Centuries later in an upper room, before the celebration of the Passover, one man would take off his outer garment. He would command those with him to take off their sandals. The Lamb of God would kneel down and wash the dirty, dusty feet of his disciples, an act of service, before his ultimate act of service. It was an act of preparation for what was to come. Preparation not just for deliverance but for service – preparing them to live into a new commandment of love and service: “Love one another as I have loved you.” But this was not a night to be hurried, not this time.

Today/tonight we celebrate the Last Supper. We do this most Sundays as we share communion. But somehow this day/this night is different. This day/this night we celebrate the Last Supper knowing that tomorrow, Good Friday, the Lamb will be slain. That because of his death, we will be delivered out of our bondage of sin and the way to new life towards a promised land, a more abundant life, will be opened to us.

For us, as Christians, the cross stained by the blood of a Divine Lamb is the doorway we pass through to begin our journey towards new life.

Today/tonight we are being prepared. Christ knows that we will be delivered. That's what Good Friday and Easter Sunday are all about. The big question for us is: "Will we, once delivered, serve the Divine cause? Will Christ's passion then stir us to service now?" By the events that took place in a long ago upper room we get the idea that Jesus was unsure of the answer to the question, as are we today. Once delivered, will we follow in his path of love and service? Jesus had to show us, once again, what service and love looked like, with yet another act: that of foot washing.

Is this foot washing a symbol relevant to us today? Why don't we just ignore this symbolic act? Thinking it has no relevance to us today? Or, thinking that it is simply something to briefly consider. And then forget it after we check off the events of Holy Week on yet another annual church calendar?

In the original story, the act, even then, served as a symbol, a sign. Jesus was the ultimate preacher/teacher. Yes, he used words. He used stories. But his life was one of acts. He was the Gospel, the Good News, and we find the Good News most powerfully taught in how he lived and how he interacted with the people around him and with God.

On the night before he was handed over to suffering and death, Jesus filled a bowl with water and washed the feet of his disciples. It was an act of service.

In Richmond, Virginia, a group of downtown churches, collaborate in a ministry to the homeless. There hundreds of the homeless gather for food, for a place to spend time together, to receive care. One of the churches, Centenary Methodist Church, has a special ministry they offer. It's called "Bless my **Sole**." A few people there offer a ministry of "foot washing" to the homeless – and the homeless line up thankfully for it. For them it is a gift of caring and a practical gift. Perhaps they feel it in their **souls**, but they definitely welcome it for their **soles**. For those who wash their feet, it is an act of service, of caring, of love. The care givers and the care receivers are bound together in a loving reenactment of an old ritual. One of serving and of letting oneself be served. It is very real for all of them, today. It's not just a long ago ritual.

On the night before he was handed over to suffering and death, Jesus filled a bowl with water and washed the feet of his disciples. It was an act of cleansing.

I remember, as a child, the times my family spent here at the river in the summer at my grandparents' cottage on the south bank of the Rappahannock. I remember a large metal bowl that stood beside the porch door, close to a hose. It was always filled with water. It was the "foot bowl." We (children as well as adults) were commanded to use it. We'd come up from playing on the sandy beach, from climbing the red clay cliff in front of the cottage, from running through the grass, from whatever we had been doing outside and we would, one by one, step into the foot bowl. The water in the bowl would get muddy, sandy, cloudy with grass and bits of shell and dirt. When it did we would simply pour it out and add more from the hose. Then, we would enter the house, "cleaned up," as Mother would say.

Christ's long ago act in an upper room in Jerusalem is a symbol – one that a long ago Jesus hoped would transcend the centuries.

Cleaned up we are on this Maundy Thursday. Delivered we will be on Good Friday.  
Born to new life we will be on Easter morning. That's the Divine reality. Servants we are to  
become. That's the Divine Desire.

Do this, do this – in remembrance of what the Divine has done for you. Do this, do this –  
in hope of what the Divine has prepared for you.