

Maundy Thursday  
April 17, 2025

There is an account of Jesus' last meal with his disciples in all of the Gospels as well as our reading tonight in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, thought to be the oldest. With the exception of tonight's Gospel from John, each telling quotes some version of what we call the "words of institution:" this bread is my body, this wine is my blood, given for your sins and for the sins of the whole world; when you eat and drink these, remember my sacrifice for you. In our prayers of thanksgiving leading to the words of institution, we are bidden to remember all of Christ's life among us - not just the final sacrifice - but his life, his death, his resurrection and ascension. Not unlike instant flashback, similar to those testified by folks who have had near-death experiences: my whole life suddenly appeared before me. We remember his death; we proclaim his resurrection; we await his coming in glory.

Salvation history – the account of our relationship with God – leaves out so many of the human details I long to discover. Similar to Jesus' life on earth, where there is so much we are not told – how old was he when he said his first word? what were his teen years like? did he have friends or was he an outsider, even as a kid? did he help around the house? did he learn carpentry from his Dad? Likewise, we are not told anything about the preparations that went into that last meal, even though three of the accounts mention Jesus' instructions to the disciples for reserving a room. And yet, here are the seeds of Altar Ministry, one of our most sacred responsibilities in the Christian Church of preparing the table for celebration of the Eucharist. We hear in Matthew, Mark and Luke that the disciples make arrangements with a man carrying a jar, and/or a man who was owner of the house in order to prepare the Passover meal. What went on? Those of us who have attended Jewish Passover or "Christian Seder" meals or have assisted in their presentation know it is time- and labor-intensive. There are the symbolic foods, intended to generate questions which refresh the memory about liberation from slavery in Egypt: unleavened bread, bitter herbs, the apple-nut-cinnamon mixture resembling mortar, greens dipped in saltwater, and lamb shank, the central actor in the Passover re-enactment. At the very least, no small feat to prepare a lamb shank so that it is edible! Tables to be set up, pillows for reclining during the ceremony, towels for ritual washing of hands, cups to hold wine, candles, serving bowls: all the little but crucial details that go into a smoothly-flowing liturgy.

And what was the conversation? I feel danger is near: the high priests are disgusted with the rabbi. I see them meeting secretly, whispering about Jesus; preaching in the temple, calling himself Son of Man, healing the man blind from birth, claiming more authority than Moses. And he says these things in public. The chief priests, the

scribes, the Roman authorities – they're all afraid of him. How can we celebrate Passover as if everything is okay when he is putting himself and all of us in such danger? But weren't we also in danger that first Passover when we marked our doorposts with lamb's blood, prepared the meal and ate standing up, ready to flee for our lives? God protected us. God delivered us out of the hands of our oppressors. Does this feel like that first Passover? Jesus is so calm. Why is he so calm? Could it be that God will save us again? Who is Jesus? What does that mean, the Son of Man? "Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, 'Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me..... But do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.....Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.....Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me.'" What does that mean? Who is this Jesus?

When we tend to our Altar Ministry tasks: when we clean and polish the sacred vessels, when we fill the cruets with water and wine, when we shelter the unleavened bread in the breadbox, when we work to remove candle wax from the altar cloth, lipstick or wine stains from the purificators, when we fold the corporal and place it in the burse, may we remember he suffered and died for our sins.

When we set the table in our dining rooms for a meal with family: carefully setting out the placemats, appropriate forks, knives, spoons, check the plates and glasses for water spots, the napkins for food stains, let us remember he suffered and died for our sins.

When we join with Brandon to help carry the cross tomorrow, let us remember he suffered and died for our sins.

And finally, on the third day – the Day of Resurrection - let us proclaim his coming again in glory.