

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
April 1, 2010  
Maundy Thursday  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Exodus 12:1-14  
Psalm 78:14-20, 23-25  
I Corinthians 11:23-26  
Luke 22:14-30

Our Old Testament lesson from Exodus finds Moses instructing the children of Israel to take lambs without defect and to slaughter them and to place the blood on the door frames of their homes. Then they are to eat a meal made from the lambs, along with bread and bitter herbs.

Following that the death angel is to pass through and strike down every first born male that is Egyptian. But when the angel sees the blood from the slaughtered lambs on the doorframes of the houses of the children of Israel, he will “pass over” those homes and spare those who live there.

This event, the Passover, became the central event in all the Old Testament. It marked God’s deliverance of the children of Israel from their slavery in Egypt, and began their identity as God’s chosen people.

The reason Moses commands the people to perpetuate this event by celebrating Passover through ritual meal and action is not because he is sentimental and wants the people to remember the “good ol’ days.”

Moses commands the people to do this because he knows that it is important for people who come along generations later to somehow “take part” in what God

has done in the past, to experience the meaning of the Passover event even though they are many years removed from it.

And through the ritual words and actions of the Passover meal, the people did just that. Through this meal, persons who were never part of the original Passover experienced for themselves their deliverance from Egypt and claimed their unique identity as God's people.

Many years later, Jesus now finds himself at table with his disciples. They are ready to celebrate the Passover meal, just as Moses instructed. But in this meal, Jesus begins to show the disciples that *he is God's true Passover Lamb*, whose body and blood is about to be offered up so that God's people might be delivered from *their* slavery -- a slavery not to Egypt, but to sin and rebellion and disobedience to God.

In his suffering and death and resurrection, Jesus showed himself as God's true Paschal Lamb. Through him, we are delivered from slavery to sin and our old life, and are born anew to a living hope of resurrection and eternal life.

But you may ask, "how can that happen for people who are so many years removed from Jesus' death?"

My answer: It happens for us in the same way it happened for God's people who celebrated the Passover meal. When the children of Israel participated in the sacred rituals of the Passover meal as Moses instructed, the meaning of that long

ago event became present reality for them. In the same way, when *we* celebrate the Lord's Supper as Jesus instructs us, the significance of his death becomes present reality for *us*.

This is precisely what the apostle Paul means when he tells the Corinthians: "whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (I Cor. 11:26).

Paul is saying that when the Church gathers and celebrates the Lord's Supper, we are not merely "announcing" to ourselves and to the world that Christ died and rose again, as though we had short memories and constantly need to be reminded of this.

Paul is saying that when we celebrate the Lord's Supper and when we enact these sacred actions and say these sacred words, the meaning and power and reality of Jesus' death is brought forward right into the present moment. Christ's saving work becomes a present reality right in our midst.

Now today begins what St. Augustine called the "Great Triduum," or great three days, where we focus on the last climactic period of Jesus' earthly life.

"Maundy Thursday" comes from the Latin *mandatum novarum* ("a new commandment"), which was later translated into the French term *mande*. It is taken from Jesus' words to the disciples in the upper room when he said to them:

“a new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

Maundy Thursday is also known as the birthday of the Eucharist, because it remembers Jesus’ institution of the very first Eucharist at the Last Supper. After supper, Jesus instructed the disciples to take bread and wine in remembrance of him. From then on, the Eucharist became the central and most holy part of Christian liturgy and worship.

Following the Last Supper, Jesus and his disciples went to the Garden of Gethsemane, where he agonized in prayer over what was about to occur. Then he was handed over to the authorities, and his passion began in earnest.

These days of the Great Triduum, then, are significant, because they are not merely a sentimental remembrance of past events.

In the early Church, the worship of these three days was originally seen and experienced as one service, one unified act of worship spread over time.

Tonight, we begin that time where we encounter in fresh ways the meaning of Jesus’ passion. After sharing the Lord’s Supper together, the altar will be stripped, and we will symbolically prepare the tomb for Jesus’ burial. We will leave in silence and darkness, symbolically sharing in some small way the abandonment and isolation Jesus must have felt as he was handed over to be tried and executed.

We will return tomorrow in silence, gathering symbolically near the tomb where Jesus has been placed after hanging in agony on the Cross. As we consider the profound depth of his suffering, we will intercede for the whole world, asking God the Father that Jesus' suffering not be in vain, but that all may come to repentance and the knowledge of the truth.

And we will leave again in the silent darkness, contemplating the meaning of Jesus' death for our own lives.

And we will return yet again on Saturday evening at dusk. We will light the Paschal flame and we will process into the darkness of the tomb, where we will recite the awesome story of God's love which has sought us, found us, redeemed us, and made us his people.

As we do, we will experience the magnificent truth that death could not hold Jesus in the tomb. We will experience anew the fact that he lives, and because he lives, we also will live forever.

As we faithfully participate in the liturgy of the next few days, we will truly encounter the Christ, who by his suffering and death and his rising again, comes to deliver all humanity from the bondage of sin and death.

This is a mystery too great for me to explain. But by his grace, you and I are called and invited to share in that mystery, and to let it change our lives forever.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

