

Maundy Thursday 2017

Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14  
Psalm 116:1, 10-17  
1 Corinthians 11:23-26  
John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Our faith is a story,  
Not a theory.

There is no Christianity  
Separate from the events we mark on this night.

If you want to see God present and active in the world,  
Look at this story,  
A story of feet and hands and bread and wine.  
Our faith does engage our minds;  
It must, to be authentic.  
We are a people who seek understanding  
And love ideas.  
But the truth of this night is that there is no Christianity  
Without touch and taste.  
We live the story in our bodies,  
As God lives the story in our body.

The center of our truth is this:  
The source of all life,  
The love that makes the world,  
willingly and completely intertwines  
the fullness of the divine self  
With the daily, touchable matter  
Of life here and now.  
God becomes a human being,  
One of us.

On this night  
God took our tired, dirty, smelly,  
Sore and misshapen feet  
In divine hands that were fully human,  
And washed them gently,  
Carefully,  
As a sign of love.  
And commanded us to do the same,  
As a sign of love.  
Love for him,  
Love for each other,

Love for the world.

On this night,  
God shared a meal of celebration  
With us,  
Breaking the bread of his ancestors,  
Saying the prayers of his people  
And making them his own,  
Lifting up the cup of forgiveness  
And commanding us to do the same.

These things happened once,  
In a real place,  
Among people just like us.  
And now they live in eternity.

If you go to Jerusalem,  
You can visit an upper room  
Said to be the place.  
Actually, you can visit three places said to be the place.  
People will tell you with great certainty  
That a certain room with a graceful vaulted ceiling is the place,  
Or built on the site of the place.  
You can touch the pale gold walls,  
The beautiful Jerusalem limestone,  
Step on the rosy red stone of the floor,  
And you can wonder,  
Was this the place?

Was this the place where Jesus took the bread,  
And blessed, and broke it,  
And promised that this simple act  
Would be the way he would never leave us?

No one knows.  
We do not know where Jesus washed the feet of his friends.  
We do not know where he shared the meal  
That became a sacrament.

What we claim is this truth:  
It really happened,  
Somewhere in the city of God,  
On the night of Passover.  
The moon was full.  
All through the city,  
In many rooms of many houses,

The words of memory and hope were repeated.

And in one room of the city,  
Jesus said new words.  
This is my body.  
This is my blood.  
Do this to remember me.

This matters.  
It is of the essence that these things happened in a real place,  
At a certain time,  
To a real person  
Who had our feet and hands  
And ate the bread we eat.  
Touched and tasted food and drink  
As we do.

This matters.  
And as essential that it is that the stones remain,  
And that somewhere in the city,  
There was once a house where he reclined at table  
With his friends,  
We do not need to go there  
Or find the place  
To make the story our story.

These stories happen now  
In all times and places.

One story –  
the washing of feet –  
became an act of memory,  
One story –  
The breaking and blessing,  
Taking and sharing of bread –  
becomes,  
Again and again,  
Day and night,  
All over the world,  
The great act of hope  
And celebration,  
The communion of all living things  
With the source of all life.

When we wash each others' feet,  
We remember what Jesus did.

This reenactment is an invitation,  
A way to live into his self-giving,  
Self-emptying love.  
When we do this thing,  
We follow his example,  
And try to understand what he embodied,  
A love so complete  
That it bound us to him,  
And him to us, forever.

That is one way of telling the story.

As compelling as that story is,  
The essence of our faith is contained in another story,  
This story:  
On that same night,  
This night,  
At table with his friends,  
He took the bread of liberation,  
And the cup of salvation,  
And offered them with thanks  
To the giver of life  
And maker of love.

And in that act of taking,  
Blessing,  
Breaking,  
And sharing,  
He created the holy-making moment  
That is in and out of time,  
The place where the infinite  
Breaks into our frail and finite lives  
And makes all things well,  
And whole,  
And holy.

That moment happened once,  
In time,  
Long ago and far away,  
In some room that may or may not still exist,  
In a city whose survival can only be called a miracle.

That matters,  
And we do not have to go there  
To tap into its power.

Because the moment of eucharist,  
The making of the great sacrament,  
Happens always and everywhere,  
Now and forever.

Frail and fallible as we are,  
The footwashing we remember this night  
Still brings close to us  
The self-emptying,  
Self-offering love of Jesus.  
That is a gift.

And the greater gift is hidden  
And really present in the bread and wine we share.

The sacrament we celebrate this night  
is as real and as true and as filled  
with life-giving power  
as it was that first night,  
under the full moon,  
in some upper room  
made of pale golden stone,  
or, more likely,  
mud and sticks.  
We cannot not know  
Exactly where it was.  
All we know is that  
When we take the bread,  
bless,  
Break and share it,  
And lift up the cup,  
God is among us  
And within us,  
To be touched and tasted and lived.

That has almost nothing to do with us.  
It has everything to do with God,  
Who is only waiting for us to reach out our hands,  
To make it so.