

Maundy Thursday

Exodus 12:1-14

Psalm 116:1,10-17

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Some of you have heard me say it a million times:
In our life together, there are certain nights
that just 'crackle.'

Nights when it seems like the veil
between this place and the heavenly realms
is so paper so thin
we could almost press right through.

There are nights that 'crackle' with mystery
because we know with some strange sense deep within us
that God is on the prowl
and something inside us is about to change.

Tonight we can almost
feel God;
smell God;
taste God on our lips.

For many of us,
Christmas Eve is one of those nights:
a night when the lights grow dim,
and angels take flight,
and we know
that God has entered our world.

But tonight is also one of those nights.

Tonight 'crackles' with a mystery all its own,
because we have come to savor
the final, most intimate moments with Jesus.
We step into this place tonight,
and time stands still.

Tonight, my friends, God kneels at our feet.
Tonight, we eat at God's table.
Tonight, we live as though we were angels.

Welcome.

* * *

If you have come on any other nights this week,
you already know *everything* has been
on a collision course toward this very night.

Schemes are afoot;
plans are in place;
betrayal is in the air;
and Jesus will soon be arrested.

But right now, it's the like the calm before the storm.

You see, it's almost time for supper—
the *Last Supper*—in which Jesus will take
ordinary bread and wine,
and give it to his friends
as the sacred mystery
of his Body and Blood.

In just a little while,
you and I will come to *this* table,
where he will do the same for us.
And in some strange way
by some mystery of love that spans all time,
Jesus will be just as present with us tonight
as he was with them two thousand years ago.

* * *

But before we can come to the table,
there is a matter of etiquette
Jesus and his disciples must attend to.

Back in those days,
people walked miles every day
in nothing more than a pair of homemade sandals.
Two loose straps and a piece of old, hard leather
were all that separated their feet
from the dirty ground. ¹

If the day was dry,
their feet would be covered
in sand and powder and grit.

¹ Barclay, William. *The Gospel of John*. Vol. 2. Westminster John Knox Press, 2001. 162-163.

If the day was wet,
their feet would be stained and caked
in thick, pasty mud.

For that reason, *every* house
had a pitcher and a bowl near the door,
and it was the *slave's* job to greet you
and wash your feet before you entered.
The thing is, Jesus and his friends are from out of town.
This is not their house; this is a rented room.
And besides, they are too poor to be able to afford a slave. ²

You would think they would just do it for each other,
but his friends aren't exactly focused on caring for each other.
In fact, they have been arguing all night
about who among them is the greatest. ³

When they all walk through that door
dirty and tired from all their travels,
you *know* they see that pitcher;
you *know* they see that bowl;
and every one of them walks right past it.

"Huh," they must have said.
"I guess somebody ought to do that,
but it ain't gonna be me."

So before they can eat—
before there can be this one last supper—
Jesus does the unthinkable
and takes matters into his own hands. ⁴

Jesus goes and grabs the pitcher and the bowl.
Jesus goes and wraps the towel around his waist.
Jesus goes and kneels down at the feet of his friends
and washes them clean.

That may not sound like a big deal,
but let me be very clear with you.

This is *the* moment
for all of you who have ever thought
that God is
too *high*,

² Ibid.

³ Luke 22:24

⁴ Barclay

too *holy*,
too *distant*,
too *remote*,
too *busy*,
too *big*,
too *far*
to ever be able
to hear you,
or see you,
or care.

*This moment—this **night**—is for you.*

Watch tonight
as Jesus comes down
low.⁵

Jesus the rabbi.
Jesus the teacher.
Jesus the Messiah.
Jesus the Son of God.
Jesus who was there when
God made the heavens and the earth.
Jesus, the One through whom all things were made.

Watch him
as he comes down *low* . . .
as he goes from *rabbi* to *slave*
and takes your feet into his hands
and washes you clean.

This is why we do what we do tonight.

Foot washing is a scandal in every age.
Feet are hidden.
Feet are private.
Feet are ticklish, *and* they are tough.
Feet are crooked, *and* they are smooth.
Some parts we're fine with people seeing,
and other parts we hope *no one* will ever see.

⁵ The following discourse on Jesus' progressive lowering of himself from rabbi to hell—and his ability to meet us even at our lowest point—comes from a sermon by the Rev. Jay Gardner, as referenced by the Rev. Jacob Smith in “Holy Week (MT, GF) (C): The Shadow of the Cross.” *Same Old Song*, Mockingbird, 7 Apr. 2022. *iTunes* app.

Is that not the perfect metaphor
for our very souls?

Is it not true that
inside each of us there are parts
that are beautiful, smooth, and clean . . .
and parts we hope no one will ever see?

Even so, tonight, Jesus comes down low,
takes *all* those parts in his hands,
and with such tremendous care says,
“Don’t worry. I’ve got this.
There is no place
where your feet
or your heart
or your mind
or your soul can take you
where I’ve not already been.

“I can always meet you,
always find you,
because even at your lowest point,
I have been *lower*.”

That is the mystery of tonight.
Really, *that* is the mystery of this whole week.

Because, you see,
it doesn’t stop there.
Later tonight, Jesus will go *lower*.

Later tonight he will go from *slave* to *criminal*
as he is arrested and put on trial.

And tomorrow he will go even *lower*:
from *criminal* to the *cross*,
executed in the
most public,
painful,
shameful way
humanity has ever devised.

But even that is not all.
He will go even lower:
from the *cross* to the *tomb*,
the lowest of all low places
where all of us must one day go.

And even *that* is not the end,
for even still, he will go lower.

As the early Church proclaimed,⁶
and as the old translations of the Creed used to say,⁷
Jesus will go from the *tomb* into *hell* itself
where Adam and Eve and all who went before us
have waited for ages in the darkness
for a rescue.

In terror, Adam will cry out, “The Lord be with you!”
to which Jesus will declare, “And also with you!”⁸
And he will break their chains
and preach the Good News,⁹
and he will say, “Get up, y’all.
I’m bustin’ you out.
It’s time to go Home.”

That, my friends, is the mystery of this night.
That is why nights like tonight ‘crackle’:
that low, low, low way of God:
from creator to rabbi,
rabbi to slave,
slave to criminal,
criminal to cross,
cross to grave,
grave into hell itself . . .
and all for us.

We always act as though to find God
we must somehow go higher and higher and higher.

No.

Tonight is a night that ‘crackles’ with the power of God
because God is meeting us where we are.

Heaven and earth are about to collide,
and Jesus has come down *low*.

Amen.

⁶ Ephesians 4:9

⁷ *Book of Common Prayer*. 53.

⁸ “An Ancient Homily for Holy Saturday.” www.vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit_20010414_omelia-sabato-santo_en.html

⁹ 1 Peter 4:6