

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

March 28, 2024 – MAUNDY THURSDAY, YR. B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: *“Coming Home—the Hospitality of God”*

Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14	(God instructs His people how to keep the Passover)
Psalms 116:1, 10-17	(The Lord hears our prayers and does much good for us)
1 Corinthians 11:23-32	(St. Paul explains the Eucharist as revealed to him by Jesus)
St. Luke 22:14-30	(Jesus institutes the Eucharist at the Last Supper)

Welcome to Maundy Thursday. Welcome to the feast of God’s boundless hospitality! If you’ve ever been the person who wasn’t invited to the party, this feast is for you—all are invited here. If you’ve ever been the person who knocked on doors that were not answered, this feast is for you—all are received here. If you’ve ever been the person without a seat at the table, this feast is for you—all are welcomed here.

Tonight, the meal is prepared and the washbasin is filled, as we are ushered into the upper room, into the intimate, inner heart of things, where Jesus awaits us. Even if you have never felt included before, tonight you are the honored guest, a seat is held for you, and there is space enough for everyone. Look around at your companions in the candlelight—disciples and wanderers—each face is a part of God’s story. Here, there are saints and sinners, the found and the lost. Here, we all belong. At this feast, there are no outsiders.

“I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you,” Jesus says in tonight’s Gospel from St. Luke. And in the account from St. John, He invites His companions to share in the meal, having “loved them to the end.” And so, Jesus’ ministry ends as it began, with an invitation:

“Come, eat at my table, rest and be washed clean, and see how fervently I have wished to bring you close to me. Though you might betray me, though you might deny me, my love will not fail, and my hospitality will never falter. True, the path ahead is narrow and the gate is small, but it will always be open to you. I will never turn you away.”

Hospitality might not be the first thing we think of tonight, at the outset of the most intense part of Holy Week. But as we enter into these three days of holy mystery, perhaps it should be on our minds. For nothing that lies ahead of us between now and Easter morning—the gloom, the grief, and the glory—can make sense until we recognize that God’s attitude toward humanity has always been and will ever be one of infinite kindness, openness, and welcome. Only a deep and abiding hospitality, a desire to gather us in and care for us, can explain the lavish mercy that exists on either side of the Cross.

Maundy Thursday, then, is not merely a narrative prologue to the events of Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter but rather, it reveals within itself the universal love behind our salvation. The feast at Jesus’ table is the culmination of a consistent characteristic of God’s relationship with us: a longing to welcome us into the innermost chamber of the Divine life and to share that life with us in eternal companionship.

This pattern of God’s hospitality is conveyed throughout Holy Scripture; we have always been saved through meals. In the beginning, God formed the earth and then welcomed humanity as beloved guests to revel in the bounty of Creation. Later, God offered the Passover feast as a sign of deliverance for the people of Israel from all that binds and oppresses and degrades. Then, God prepared a feast of manna in the wilderness and bid Israel come and savor the taste of their liberation.

And now on this night, a new feast is ready, and it is a feast for all people. It comes from the same wellspring of God’s generosity as all the feasts of old, but it is also radically different, for it is a feast that consists of God’s own body, God’s own lifeblood. Everything is on the table, so to speak; no greater hospitality could ever be offered to us.

And then, of course, there is the washing. “You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand,” Jesus says, cradling our tired feet in His tender hands—and within them all of those aching memories of the long road that has brought us to this place. He washes them gently, as if holding a newborn child, because tonight something new is indeed being born—a new commandment, a new possibility, a new world in which love and service are the highest values.

How desperately we have needed this gift through the long, lean years. For we live in a Spirit-starved world, a world where love too often feels inaccessible, like a banquet glimpsed through a closed window or a beautiful song written for someone else. But not tonight. Tonight, the music plays for you, and tonight the meal has been prepared to satiate your soul’s deepest hunger. Tonight, Jesus has brought us to a “Last Supper” which is actually the beginning, where we taste and see the fullness of God’s offering of new life to us; where we are bathed in the promise of mercy. The only question is whether we can bear to trust and accept what is given.

We have not known this way before. This world has not taught us to believe in the power of such things. How could we possibly comprehend such abundant tenderness when life is usually so hard and mean? Bruised by sorrow, encased within our defenses, how could we dream that we might be saved by the softness of God’s caress, the nourishment of God’s body? Is it any wonder the disciples begin to dispute about who among them might be the greatest? Such inconceivable humility and gentleness causes them confusion and alarm.

And yet we want to believe, Lord. We want to follow Your commandment to love one another as You have loved us. Underneath our callouses and our callousness, we want to conceive of such a love and live it out. We want to know what it feels like, finally, to arrive at home; to rest, to cease our relentless search for belonging, and to offer others that same welcoming experience. So, give us the grace and the courage to try. In the giving and the receiving, the feeding and being fed, help us to experience Your presence, Lord Jesus. Then help us to continue on in Your Name.

Too many of us have known the loneliness of not being invited to the party and the silence of the unanswered door. Too many of us have never had a seat at the tables of this world. And so, we are hungry and we are tired and we are afraid, but we are here, and we want to believe. So be patient with us, God, as we struggle to accept that we do in fact deserve Your hospitality and Your welcome, and that in Your eyes, we have always deserved it.

Be patient with us, for this has been a long time coming. In fact, we’ve been waiting our whole lives for such an invitation as this, and now we stand at the threshold of everything You offer us, everything You are, wide-eyed with wonder and hope.

May we be the guests You have been waiting for. May we receive Your love, and in return, love You and everyone else. And may this Maundy Thursday be the moment, at long last, when we glimpse the hospitality offered us through Your salvation, and the salvation inherent in Your hospitality—the people of St. John’s and our God meeting at one table, washed clean, nourished deeply, finally and forever—home.*

Amen.

* Adapt. Phil Hooper, “This Feast Is for You,” 14 April 2022, [EpiscopalChurch.org](https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/this-feast-is-for-you-maundy-thursday-april-14-2022/) <<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/this-feast-is-for-you-maundy-thursday-april-14-2022/>> 12 March 2024. Used with permission