

“This is the Night”
The Rev. Lauren McDonald
Hickory Neck Episcopal church – Toano, VA
Maundy Thursday, April 9, 2009
Exodus 12:1-14, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, John 13:1-17, 31b-35

This is the night. This is the night that we tell the story. Part of the story is very ancient. It is the part of the story that we share with our Jewish brothers and sisters. It's the story of the night of the Passover, the night that God led the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt into a new life. We heard just a tiny portion of that story in our Old Testament reading tonight, the part in which God gives Moses and Aaron instructions about their last meal in Egypt. Make sure the lamb is without blemish. Put some blood on the doorposts. Eat the lamb roasted with unleavened bread. Eat it with your staff in your hand and your shoes on your feet. In other words, be ready to move. God was going to pass over God's people, spare them from the plague, which would strike Egypt, and free them from their bondage. “This shall be a day of remembrance for you.”

Over and over the story was told, passed down from generation to generation. Parents told it to children. Priests told it to the people. Old people told it to the young. The community told and retold the story. The story formed the community. God had heard their cries in Egypt and delivered them from their distress. Of course leaving Egypt was just the beginning of a very long journey, through the waters of the Red Sea, deep into the wilderness, through forty years of wandering, and finally into the promised land. God led them with fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day. God fed them with manna when they were hungry and brought forth water from the rock when they thirsted. Despite their newfound freedom, the people murmured against God. But God remained faithful to them no matter how they turned away, no matter how they worshiped idols, no matter how

they complained against God. And the people told the story. The story of God's faithfulness continued to be passed down.

(Move from pulpit to behind the table.)

This is the night. This is the night that Jesus was betrayed, and on this night the story of the Passover was still being told. The Hebrew people *received* specific instructions on how to eat their last meal before leaving Egypt and beginning their new life. Jesus *gave* specific instructions on the night of his last meal before dying and beginning a new life. He and his disciples were retelling the Passover story, remembering God's mighty acts in Egypt. Jesus sat at the table with his friends, took bread, gave thanks, broke the bread, and gave it to them. "This is my body. Do this in remembrance of me." In the midst of telling the ancient story of the Hebrew people, Jesus told a new story. "This is my blood. Do this in remembrance of me." No longer do you need a lamb without a blemish. No longer do you need to put blood on the doorposts. Now you have Jesus. This is the story you must remember. This is the story you must tell.

Over and over the story has been told, passed down from generation to generation. Parents told it to children. Priests told it to the people. Old people told it to the young. The community told and retold the story. The story formed the community. This is *our* story, the story we retell each week as we worship. God heard the cries of God's people, groaning in the slavery of sin. God delivered the people from sin and death. God became incarnate, came to live among us, shared our joys and sorrows, our hunger and thirst, our life and our death. Our God dwelled among us and then died, that we might have eternal life.

This is my body, given for you. Do this in remembrance of me. Tell the story. Pass down the story of God's faithfulness as you eat the bread and drink the wine. Remember that God has saved God's people, bringing us out of death and into life.

(Move to front of table by foot washing stations.)

This is the night. This is the night that we remember the ancient story of the Passover. This is the night that we remember Jesus' last meal with his disciples. This is the night that we tell the story of how Jesus washed the feet of his friends, serving them even on the last night before he died. This is the night that we not only *tell* our story; this is night that we also *live* our story. Jesus didn't only *tell* us what to do – do this in remembrance of me – but he also *showed* us what to do. He spent the last night before his crucifixion at table with his friends, eating a meal, remembering the story of his people, and then he washed the feet of his disciples. “If I your Lord and Teacher have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.”

On the night he was betrayed, Jesus continued to serve, to show his disciples what new life in him meant. When the Hebrew people left Egypt, they were just beginning their journey, and they found that their new life had challenges that were difficult to face. At times it made them long for the old life. Although they were slaves in Egypt, it was a familiar slavery. Sometimes the bondage of slavery seems more appealing than the demands of new life. It can feel easier to cling to the past than to allow Jesus to wash us clean. How often do we say with Peter, “You will never wash my feet”?

New life in Jesus means that we must allow him into the dark and dirty spaces of our lives. New life in Jesus means that we allow him to serve us and then we turn

to serve our neighbors. New life in Jesus means that we allow him to love us, and then we love others. It's not a very complicated story. Pretty easy to remember.

This is the night. This is the night that we tell all these stories. This is the night *before* the crucifixion and the resurrection, *before* the dying and rising again. This is the night when we remember that Jesus showed us how to live, right here, right now. He meets us where we are, no matter how filthy our feet are, no matter how great our sin. No amount of dirt is too much for him. He meets us where we are and gently and lovingly washes us. And then he asks us to do the same for each other. This is our story. This is the night.