

Disruption, Remembrance, and Love
A homily by Elizabeth Lienesch
Maundy Thursday -- April 1st, 2021, St. John's Episcopal Church

In the name of God, Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit.

Greetings on this Maundy Thursday. I hope you have found a way to celebrate our agape meal this evening. Maybe you are with your family, maybe you are connecting virtually with others, or maybe you are physically on your own. But know, no matter where you are on this holy night, you are loved by and part of the body of Christ.

A few weeks ago, on one of those first days I felt I could be outside without my long underwear on, I took the dog for a walk along the Stone Arch Bridge. The day had *that feeling* – the one that comes with spring in the Twin Cities. Lots of people were out with their kids, their dogs, their friends, or on their own, just enjoying that feeling of unfurling. I felt like I could watch people's shoulders relax as they realized they didn't have to hunch up against a cold wind. People were holding the hats and coats and gloves that they had brought just in case but had been able to strip off. I knew at least some of the people walking that day had likely had a vaccination against COVID-19. Everyone on the bridge that afternoon seemed to be breathing a collective sigh of relief.

As I crossed over the bridge and walked up towards the Guthrie Theater, I stopped near the Mill City Museum. As I'm sure many of you know, the museum is built in a way that keeps much of the old, ruined mill on which it sits visible. Underneath the new steel scaffolding of the building, they have kept damaged bricks and wood beams from the flour mill that once operated on that spot. As I walked by, I noticed, over the door of the old mill, a memorial to those killed in an explosion there in 1878. 18 workers were killed when combustible flour dust exploded and the building caught fire.

I continued walking. Just a few hundred yards up the hill, I stopped to look at the memorial to those who died in the 35W bridge collapse. The 13 steel columns stand overlooking the river, honoring the people who died in the disaster. It's almost hard to remember the place where the bridge once stood, and the devastation faced by the city that day.

As I continued on my walk, and felt the sun still shining and watched happy people walk by, I was struck by the way in which our lives are also like this: marked by a mix of new life and rebirth, disruption, and death. It can come in many forms. Falling in love. Receiving an unexpected diagnosis. Finding beauty in the changing seasons. A mental health crisis. A new baby. A lay-off. A death. This past year has, of course, brought disruption on a scale that none of us could have anticipated. And yet I've talked to many of you who have also found new patterns, new hobbies, or new habits that have brought you joy during this time.

The Israelites were likely experiencing deeply mixed feelings as they prepared for their flight out of Egypt. In our reading today from Exodus, God gives Moses and Aaron instructions for preparing for the Passover. The last of the plagues is imminent, and there is a sense of impending disruption. God instructs the Israelites to be ready. To get dressed. To not waste time waiting for bread to rise. To mark their doorposts so that their children will be saved. This is a moment of intense hope. It is one the Israelites are instructed to commemorate to this day. And yet, it is a deeply frightening and unsettling moment. It is a moment full of anxiety and fear and death.

I want to acknowledge that this is a very difficult passage. The death that accompanies the tenth plague has made this a passage that people – both Jewish and Christian – have wrestled with for centuries. As I read it, I am drawn to a prayer from a Haggadah – a written guide to the Passover Seder – created by the women’s program in a Jewish Community Center in Manhattan. In it, the writers acknowledge the pain and suffering that is so present in this story. Then they appeal to God with this prayer:

*Soften our hearts and the hearts of our enemies. Help us to dream new paths to freedom. So that the next sea-opening is not also a drowning; so that our singing is never again their wailing.” **

The moment of the Passover was a time of uncertainty and pain as well as faith and hope.

So was the moment when Jesus and his disciples sat down, in what would be their last supper together, to commemorate and celebrate that Passover.

It is on this night that Jesus tells his disciples he will be with them only a little longer. They have been anticipating his time of suffering, and have been told that Jesus’ death will be followed by resurrection. But surely, they were also scared. Their entire lives were about to be turned upside down. Jesus was about to be arrested and executed. They themselves faced persecution and death. They knew of Jesus’ promise of the resurrection, but had no idea if that promise would actually come true.

The preparation for the exodus and for the last meal before the crucifixion were, like many of the moments in our own lives, deeply complicated. Full of anxiety and anticipation. Heartbreak and hope.

Like the Israelites as they awaited the exodus and the disciples as they awaited Christ’s resurrection, I believe we are also at a pivotal moment in our own lives and in the lives of our church, our city, and our country. Will we rush to forget the pandemic or will we learn from the death and isolation we have experienced and become a culture more committed to care and compassion? Will the reckoning we have seen over the last year with our racial history as a church and country fade away, or will we remain collectively committed to a more just future? Will we, as the prayer says, “dream new paths to freedom?”

In the midst of these big questions, and at this pivotal moment, I believe we can turn to today’s scripture for good news. In the readings from both Exodus and John, we see that God wants us to build loving communities with each other. As the Israelites prepare for the exodus, God instructs them to share the Passover lambs with each other. To eat together. To assemble together for the ritual. In the reading from John, we are given one of most important sacraments. We are taught how to come together for the sacrament of the Eucharist. To do this in remembrance of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. And we are given the commandment: to love one another. This, he tells us, is how people will know we are followers of Jesus. In the breaking of bread and in the prayers. In our love for each other.

These are both stories of how we must live together during our inevitably uncertain lives. We must come together. Eat together. Be a community. Love each other.

It has been a hard year to be together. Even now, we’re each in our separate homes celebrating Maundy Thursday. But we have also, over and over again, found ways to connect. To show and receive love. Whether during Zoom coffee hour, backyard gatherings, phone calls, emails, or simply by praying for each other, St. John’s has continued to be a community striving to be together and to live God’s love in the world.

Disruptions will come. Some will bring joy. Others will bring suffering. Some may even bring a mix of both at the same time. Winter will turn into spring and back into winter again. But through it all, God knits us together with each other. God gives us the gift of communion. God shows us how to love.

So this Maundy Thursday, let us acknowledge the wholeness of our lives. Let us remember both the deaths of Egyptians in the midst of the Israelites' escape from Egypt and let us celebrate God's commitment to breaking the chains of oppression. Let us remember Christ's last meal and crucifixion while also knowing that that Easter awaits us, welcoming us into the promise of God's love. And let us always remember and be grateful for the community of faith that surrounds us, even when we're not physically together, holding us in love.

Amen.

*Tamara Cohen, ed., [*The Journey Continues*](#), 70