

Sermon – “An Odor of Smoke”  
Maundy Thursday, March 29, 2018  
Scripture Reading: John 13:1-17, 31b-35  
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Tonight we remember the last supper Jesus had together with his disciples. Shortly we will celebrate communion, which Matthew, Mark, and Luke relate to us as a part of this very supper. John’s telling, however, focuses on a different act of Jesus, and on his final commandments to his disciples prior to his arrest and crucifixion. Hear now the Word of God, as related to us in the words of John, chapter 13, verse 1 through 17 and 31b through 35:

*13:1 Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. 2 The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper 3 Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, 4 got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. 5 Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.*

*6 He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?” 7 Jesus answered, “You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.” 8 Peter said to him, “You will never wash my feet.” Jesus answered, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” 9 Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” 10 Jesus said to him, “One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.” 11 For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, “Not all of you are clean.”*

*12 After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? 13 You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. 14 So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. 15 For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. 16 Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. 17 If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them...*

*31b Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. 32 If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. 33 Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ 34 I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”*

There is a moment in any catastrophe where you do not yet fully understand what is about to come, but it suddenly comes into your awareness that something is going wrong in some way. It is that moment which we visit today in the life of the followers of Jesus of Nazareth. The story we have just heard, taking place several years after this band of early believers began to follow him everywhere, absorbing his words, witnessing his miracles, and learning from his example, is situated at the end of Jesus's life—but they do not know this yet.

They have gathered together around the time of the Passover festival, for another of the many meals they have shared with their leader and teacher. But it is not just another evening of fellowship and teachings at the foot of their rabbi. For these twelve, and for us as we ponder and take to heart these events, it turns out to be a night of being ill-at-ease.

It begins with many of the usual ways Jesus puts people ill-at-ease. Considering his long history of teaching through hard-to-comprehend parables, and his tendency to respond to things in ways unlike anyone else, they are surely accustomed to him saying and doing things that confuse and perturb those around him. Tonight, it begins with an unexpected act: tying a towel around himself, pouring water, and beginning to wash their feet. “You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand,” he oh-so-helpfully declares.<sup>1</sup>

Peter is clearly made uncomfortable by this very subservient act on the part of Jesus, and he objects vehemently to being in the position of master to his Lord. It is in Jesus's response here that the discomfiting elements are suddenly pushed to a much higher level than usual. “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.”<sup>2</sup> An enormous ultimatum is, from out of nowhere, attached to what is taking place. Their entire relationship with Jesus is at stake. It is shocking and unsettling, and they and we get a hint that this evening bears much greater weight and consequence than they had previously understood.

He only adds to the discomfort with a command. “Love one another,” he orders them.<sup>3</sup> It might have a nice, pleasant sound, but he has demonstrated what that means, and his are not abstract, isn't-that-nice, sentimental words about love. He is telling them to love one another *as he has loved them*. “For I have set you an example,” he says.<sup>4</sup> When Jesus commands them to love, he is telling them—and demonstrating to them—that they are to lower themselves to the status of servant, unconcerned with status and undeterred by dust or mud, with hands filthy from getting up close to one another in ongoing, intimate servanthood.

And it is topped off by a bewildering, troubling pronouncement: “Little children, I am with you only a little longer.”<sup>5</sup> “Where I am going, you cannot come,” he declares.<sup>6</sup> He begins with ritual, already given an unnerving level of weight, and it becomes ominous with these foreboding words, Jesus talking as though these commandments are being given for a very near-future time when he is gone from them.

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<sup>1</sup> John 13:7 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

<sup>2</sup> John 13:8 (*NRSV*).

<sup>3</sup> John 13:34 and 35 (*NRSV*).

<sup>4</sup> John 13:15 (*NRSV*).

<sup>5</sup> John 13:33 (*NRSV*).

<sup>6</sup> John 13:33 (*NRSV*).

Tonight's happenings are a tipping point slowly comprehended, with only the hints yet seen of what will very soon precipitously progress into a sudden, rapidly developing, horrifying disaster. This the moment where we rest on the edge of what is unclear and become uncomfortable, where something moves into the periphery of our vision and we haven't quite come to see what it is yet, but our instincts are beginning to become aware that something is off. This is where the disciples are catching a whiff of something: "Do you smell smoke? I thought I just caught a faint odor of something burning." This is that brief span of time where the smell of smoke first comes into one's conscious perception, but is not understood enough to cause alarm or panic. We know what the disciples do not: that what is burning will become a conflagration that burns the entire, years-long Jesus movement to the ground in under twenty-four hours.

Detecting smoke in the room is an even more apt metaphor when we consider the part of this passage we skipped over in tonight's reading. Left out in the middle is where it makes the transition from a trace of smoke to a definite presence of it, creating a confused haze in the room, but still with an unclear source. For this is where Jesus says strange things about one of them betraying him. They would be alarming were they not so perplexing and surprising, and mostly not understood.<sup>7</sup> It is simply not clear that the whole building is about to burn down.

They also do not understand partly because Jesus, to whom they look as their leader, is not trying to escape. He is calm and troubled simultaneously. *You are to love one another, just as I have loved you. Betrayal is coming—from among you! The Glory of God has come, and is coming, and I soon will not be with you!*

Tonight is unfinished and troubling business. We do not get an ending. We leave it midway through the growing sense of impending disaster, the emergent awareness that everything on which we stand might shortly be pulled from under us. Tomorrow night's telling of the Passion story carries this to its completion, takes us to the dramatic doom of Jesus and his ministry, and tonight's sense of unease comes from the disciples' slight but growing, confused awareness that tomorrow's darkness is where it is headed.

The doom, though, to which they are headed...is not the only theme being stated. It is given counterpoint by a different melodic line, one we can hear if we listen for it. Jesus is creating this unease, telling them of the catastrophe to come, but he is also giving them something else: directives for continuation. He is handing them commandments predicated on something enduring. He is giving them words, in the middle of his warning, which make no sense if nothing will persevere through the fire to come. It will take them some days to see that anything has survived: three days, to be exact. For Jesus Christ, upon whom rest all their hopes and ours, really will die here, and be extinguished from the earth.

Such darkness is frightening, and lonely. It leaves us questioning, and uncertain. We know we are to love one another, and we find some comfort in doing so, but we, too, knowing of our own mortality, have a whiff of the odor of smoke, and are uneasy about what it portends. Walking through this uneasy night, we pray that we would be protected, preserved, and forgiven for our own part in betraying and disobeying.

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<sup>7</sup> See John 13:17-30.

Shortly, following our own breaking of bread together, we will hear a piece of music which carries this very prayer for us. Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*, which we will hear on the organ, was also arranged in another form: as a long, mournful, prayerful, choral setting of the *Agnus Dei*, which is part of the ancient Ordinary of the mass, sung or recited at the time when the communion bread is broken in remembrance of this same night in the life of Jesus Christ. Its text, in Latin, is this:

*Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.*

*Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.*

*Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, dona nobis pacem.*

Or, in English:

Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.

Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.

Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, grant us peace.

We would do well to let these words be our words. We know no more than the disciples what lies directly ahead of us. We remember this night of their unease because the same hope given to them immediately before the bottom fell out of their entire existence is our hope as well.

Even when the slight odor of something burning, setting us ill-at-ease, becomes a visible haze filling our field of vision, and the haze becomes a thick, unbreathable cloud of smoke engulfing us, even when the flames ultimately rise, high and hot and wide, and all that could possibly be lost is lost, we remember the words of our Lord Christ who journeyed willingly, directly into the inferno, telling us to bind closely to one another in love, and assuring us that our foundation and purpose as his disciples shall endure through the fire.

Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us. Lamb of God, grant us peace. Amen.