

Maundy Thursday Meditation

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St. John's Chapel UCC

The high drama of this evening is without parallel. It is a tragic story, a heart rending story. It is also a story that must be lived in order to know resurrection. One of the tragedies of Holy Week and Easter is that so few will reenact this drama. So many will try to move from the jubilant parade of Palm Sunday to the overwhelming joy of Easter. Yet, we can't get to Easter from Palm Sunday. Easter is about resurrection, about that which arises from tragedy. It's about losing it all to gain the ultimate. It's about being stripped of everything---even life---and discovering the glory of all glory.

Act One of our reenactment of this drama begins with the Tenebrae, a Latin term for shadows. It is a service of lessons accompanied by the gradual extinguishing of light.

Act Two, the "Stripping of the Chancel" takes us past the betrayal, the arrest, and the denial, to the craziness of Jesus' trial and death. Liturgical drama can sometimes say volumes more than the best of sermons. The chancel will be stripped of all color---paraments and banners. The alter will be stripped of bread (nourishment), Bible (the word), the alter candles (light), the cross (resurrection) and the offerings (gifts). We will be left with only the chalice and the light of Christ on the alter—with the chalice soon to be tipped over to symbolize spilt blood and Christ's light, and life, extinguished.

Psalms 22 will be read while the chancel is stripped. The first line of which we find coming from the lips of Jesus on the cross. According to Mark, the only thing Jesus said on the cross. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

With the Psalms, Jesus was clearly familiar, as were most Jews. On Palm Sunday, it was a psalm, a pilgrimage psalm, the people were shouting. At the Passover, when we're told they conclude with a hymn, it was more than likely Psalm 114-118 (the middle of these we used as our call to worship this evening), for these were the Psalms sung at the end of the liturgy of the Jewish celebration for Passover Seder.

Psalm 22 would have been the hymn one would turn to when experiencing, "a dark night of the soul"—a time when things get so bad that it feels as if even God has deserted us. We have a hard time imagining Jesus ever experiencing the absence of God's presence, but if he was as truly human as he was divine, if he was to know the ultimate pain of that we as humans experience—then he too experienced the ultimate tragedy—the tragedy of feeling deserted by even God.

This year we add Act Three. We will leave the darkened silence of this sanctuary to walk our labyrinth. The walk begins behind the bell tower...whenever you are ready. Give yourself time in the darkened sanctuary if you wish. Leave to walk the labyrinth when you feel ready. Give whoever is in front of you a chance to walk past, especially at the turn in the sidewalk before moving from behind the bell tower. I suggest you do the walk as if you were with Joseph of Arimathea (ar-i-me-the-a). Joseph of Arimathea was the man who went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. As you walk down the long sidewalk to the labyrinth imagine yourself going boldly to Pilate with Joseph...Pause at the labyrinth entrance to imagine helping Joseph take Jesus down from the cross and wrapping Jesus' body in linen cloth...Walk the labyrinth carrying Jesus, body to the tomb....At the center of the labyrinth gently lay Jesus' body in the tomb...With this dismal, tragic scene stamped on our minds...walk out to live in the

expectation of a hoped-for Easter. It's like an African American minister once said, "This may be a Good Friday world, but Easter, it is a coming."

Stripping of the Chancel