

**Sacred Theater**  
**Lori Erickson**  
**April 6, 2023**

For almost 20 years, Bob and I have attended a Passover Seder at the house of some friends in Iowa City. Most years the Seder falls sometime during Holy Week, which makes for a very full week of religious rituals.

I've come to love being part of a Seder. For one thing, I love how homey it is—unlike Holy Week services, which are held in a church, the Seder is a ritual that is celebrated in homes. Around the world, millions of Jews gather around their dinner tables. They read from the Haggadah, a booklet that contains the order of service and prayers. They retell how the Israelite slaves were released from captivity in Egypt, which is the heart of the Exodus story. They eat symbolic foods, from parsley dipped in salt that recalls the bitterness of life in slavery to charoset, a blend of apples and nuts and wine that symbolizes the mortar used by the Israelite slaves to build structures for the Pharaoh. Hebrew prayers are chanted, many beginning with a phrase

*Barukh ata Adonai Eloheinu, melekh ha'olam.*

Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the universe

And all the while, the smells from the kitchen get stronger and more aromatic, giving us a hint of the feast to come. Even better, throughout the evening, as part of the ritual, we drink four glasses of wine (though those can be small glasses).

To me it feels like being part of a sacred play, and there are moments in every Seder when a shiver runs up my arms, as if the numinous has come close—a touch of something deeply rooted in both history and spirit.

Tonight on Maundy Thursday, memories of all those Seders come back to me. They remind me that Jesus was born a Jew, lived as a Jew, and died a Jew. His Last Supper was a Seder meal, celebrated in Jerusalem during the Passover holiday.

I can see the echoes of the Seder threading through the evening. For example, even though we are in a church, not someone's house, we also have elements that are surprisingly intimate and homey. The most significant is the washing of feet. I know, I know, it can seem weird and make people uncomfortable. But this is an ancient practice. In the dry and dusty region of Palestine, foot washing was done as people entered a home. In wealthier homes, it was done by servants and slaves. That's why Jesus taking over this duty was so shocking to his disciples. Here was the Messiah, the anointed one, on his knees, doing this humble task.

It was, however, a humble task that Jesus infused with new meaning:

**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? You call me Teacher and Lord--and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord**

**and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. . . . I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."**

This command is so important that it is enshrined in the name of this service—Maundy Thursday. Maundy comes from the Latin word *mandatum*, meaning “command.” It’s where we get our English word “mandate.”

I encourage you to have your feet washed this evening, and if your knees can take it, to wash someone else’s feet. Think of it as the easiest way you can emulate Jesus. You don’t have to give away all your wealth, or forgive seventy times seven, or turn the other cheek when someone hurts you. You just have to receive the gift of foot washing from someone else, and give it to someone in return.

We do so because in following the example of Jesus, we enact with our hands, our muscles, and our bodies his commandment to serve one another with humility. Masterful teacher that he was, he illustrated his command with something so vivid and unexpected that his followers would always remember it.

I think part of what makes both the Maundy Thursday service and the Seder ritual so powerful is that they are grounded in tactile rituals. We participate with our actions and all our senses, not just our words. During the Seder, we dip a finger into a cup of wine and then put a drop of wine onto a plate. We do this ten times in recognition of the suffering endured by the Egyptian people during each of the plagues visited upon them. We eat the unleavened bread called matzah, like the Israelites who had to leave in a hurry without letting their bread rise. We feel the cool air blow into the house when the front door is opened so that the prophet Elijah can come in.

And in our service tonight, we get our feet washed, wash someone else’s feet, and then gather at the altar for a meal that recalls the Seder meal that Jesus shared with his followers.

And as we do these things, these traditions are planted in our hearts for another year. Because unless stories and rituals are enacted, they die.

Let me tell you a story that relates to the themes of tonight. A number of years ago I got the chance to tour Egypt, where I saw the Great Pyramids and cruised the Nile and did a host of fascinating things. One of my most memorable experiences was visiting the mummy room at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

There are a number of bodies kept in glass display cases there. All are of royalty from the Egyptian Empire that lasted for 3,000 years.

The body that most fascinated me was that of Ramses II, who by tradition is the Pharaoh who reigned during the Exodus story. I stood for a long time staring at his shriveled face. I imagined the glory he knew in his life, the palaces and monuments built in his name., the armies he

commanded and lands he conquered. And now this once-great man is a curiosity for museum-goers, forgotten as soon as they get to the next exhibit area.

During the Seder, I sometimes think of that shriveled body as I'm surrounded by happy people feasting and retelling the story of the liberation from Egypt. It is the slaves who lived to tell that tale. In the words of Mary's Magnificat, "He has cast down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly." Pretty much no one except historians cares much about Ramses II, or for the Egyptian Empire for that matter. But during Passover celebrations all over the world, Jews celebrate their liberation from the Pharaoh, a story that has inspired countless other freedom movements throughout history.

Our Maundy Thursday ritual is intertwined with that ancient story, too. For us, Maundy Thursday is a key part of the tragic journey to Good Friday. The mood is somber. We know what's coming. As Jesus gathered with his followers, he knew what was coming. But even as his death approached, he knelt for another act of teaching and service.

And Jesus, like Moses, was leading his people—who include all of us—into freedom.

So tonight we kneel, we wash each other's feet, and we remember his command to love one another.