

MAUNDY THURSDAY
March 29, 2018

Text: Psalm 116:1-2 and 12-19

Theme: I love the Lord

I love the Lord! I love the Lord because he listens to me whenever I beg him for mercy. He is so attentive to everything that goes on in my life especially when I am confused and I do not know which way to turn. I know all I have to do is cry out to him and he answers me with his compassion and grace. He makes all things right. Even when I am at the end of my rope he helps me see a glimmer of light in a sea of darkness.

With the Lord at my side I say to myself:

Just relax and rest for God has showered you with blessings.

To my soul I say ... you have been rescued from death.

And to my eyes ... you have been spared the tears and sadness.

And to my feet ... you were stopped before you stumbled.

Now I stride in the presence of the Lord. I am alive in the land of the living. I remain faithful despite all that has happened to me.

So what can I give back to the Lord for all these blessings? I know! I will offer him prayers of thanksgiving! I will promise him my full obedience, and I will tell everyone what he has done. O God, here I am your faithful servant. Set me free for I am ready. Yes, I will do what I have promised, in this place of worship, in this house of God.

For my spiritual exercise this week, I studied Psalm 116 (the psalm assigned for this very night) and rewrote it in the words you just heard me speak. In Jewish tradition it is part of the *Egyptian Hallel* that is read on the fourth night of the Passover. It is a personal testimony of an exuberant soul who is overflowing with thanksgiving and praise to God. It is a song that comes from his personal experiences of God being present in his darkest hour. From start to finish it bears witness to a love for God that will never die.

But as profoundly personal as this psalm is, it was meant to be proclaimed in the company of all the people. His experiences did not isolate him or set him apart from the rest of the community.

Rather, his testimony was meant to connect those who heard it so that they, too, could be drawn into the flow of praise and thanksgiving.

Tonight we join the disciples and experience Christ as the psalmist experienced God ... for they are one and the same Lord. Although this is the same night in which he was betrayed we are first invited to come and be with Jesus in the Upper Room.

Almost three years ago these disciples left their homes and families to dedicate their whole lives to Christ. He became their mentor as he taught them lessons about the kingdom of God and their place in that kingdom. They saw him work miracles and heal the sick. And while on this amazing journey their love for him must have grown stronger each and every day.

O how they must have loved the Lord! After all, they were chosen to be his disciples. They were the ones who were present when Jesus cast out demons from those who cried out for mercy. They were standing next to him when he intervened so the woman caught in adultery would not be stoned to death. They heard the people cry out to him in their grief and they witnessed him respond with compassion. He raised the dead. He searched for the lost. He made everything right. He let people into the light of his love and led them out of the darkness that consumed them and they loved him for it.

With Christ at their side (and in the comfort of the Upper Room) I would hope that the experiences the disciples had with him over these years would help them recall the words of Psalm 116. I would hope that they could say to themselves: We should just relax and rest for we are in the presence of our Lord. Even though he told us that he will not escape death and he will not be spared pain and suffering and he will stumble on his way to Golgotha, we must keep our stride in the presence of our Lord. We must remain faithful despite all that will soon take place.

It is on this very night that Jesus teaches his disciples more valuable lessons as he answers the question raised by the psalmist:
So what can we give back to the Lord for all his blessings?

For on this night Jesus did not just teach them what they should do but he showed them. He got down on his hands and knees and he washed their feet like a servant would do for his master.

He set an example for his disciples and told them to do likewise. And unlike the other gospels, in John we have four more chapters where Jesus continues to talk about what life will be like without him. Jesus is leading the way and in his absence he promises the gift of the Holy Spirit. He has them rooted in him so they will continue to bear fruit. And at the end of this extended discourse (and right before his arrest) he offers a prayer of intercession for those who follow him and who believe him to be the Son of God. He implores his heavenly Father to protect them and to unite them as one.

On the eve of Good Friday this is the night for songs of thanksgiving and praise. We are blessed to have a God who carries our burdens and stays by our side when we experience our own tribulations and trials. We are blessed to know a God who forgives us the multitude of our sins and only shows us mercy. We are blessed to have such an intimate relationship with God that he is attentive to our cries and even prays on our behalf. He holds us in love and with compassion. He makes all things right. He offers light in the midst of our darkest days. And we can do nothing less than be faithful.

As we prepare ourselves now to receive the bread and wine, the true presence of the body and blood of Christ, we do so in thanksgiving for all that God through Christ has done for us. In his supper, the crucified and resurrected Christ is present. We are forgiven. We are connected to the biblical story of Israel and to the promises that God gave to his people. We are linked to the story of the early church as we cling to the promise that Christ will come again. All of these are reasons for us to rejoice on this night ... the night in which he was betrayed.

It is an evening for thanksgiving. It is a night to recount our personal stories that give voice to the way in which God has heard us and has attended to us. We give thanks for the way in which God has become known to us in water, bread, and wine. It is a night for testimonies. It is a night for songs of praise.

With the end of this psalm the celebration will end for a brief time. Soon the betrayal, a trial, torture, death, a tomb, a stone, and then the chilling silence on Saturday. But this is not a story in which the end is in doubt. We lift the chalice on this night and say within our hearts:

O how we love the Lord!
We offer our prayers of thanksgiving!
We will tell everyone what God has done.

O God, here we are your faithful servants. We are ready. We will go and do likewise, from this place of worship, from this house of God.
Amen