

Homily preached by Brother James Koester SSJE  
Monastery of Saint Mary and Saint John  
Maundy Thursday, 2020  
Exodus 12: 1-4 (5-10) 11-14  
Psalm 116 1, 10-17  
1 Corinthians 11: 23-26  
John 13: 1-17, 31b-35

## And It Was Night

One of the most chilling scenes in all of Scripture, at least for me, comes within the context of tonight's gospel reading from John. While we did not read it this evening, it forms a piece of the story of that first Maundy Thursday. Jesus and the disciples were gathered in the Upper Room. The foot washing has taken place, and Jesus speaks of the one who would betray him. *Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me....So when [Jesus] had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot.... [After] receiving the piece of bread, [Judas] immediately went out. And it was night.*<sup>1</sup>

Whenever I read those four words, *and it was night*, a chill goes up and down my spine.

For our first century forebears, and perhaps for you as a child, night was a time of uncertainty, of loneliness, of isolation, of fear. Who has not, at one time or another, been afraid of the dark, been afraid of the night? Perhaps you still are. I know that as a child, I was. I was afraid of the darkness under my bed, and worse, the dark void of the open closet. I would whimper until one of my older brothers, with whom I shared my bedroom, would get up and close the closet door. Perhaps there is still something about the night that frightens you. Who has not been nervous walking down a dark street in the dead of night? I know that sometimes I am. Perhaps there is still something about the dark that frightens you.

Every time I hear these words, *and it was night*, a chill goes up and down my spine, because it reminds me that *night* still has the power to make us afraid.

Tonight, perhaps especially tonight, our fear is all too real, and we are overwhelmed by feelings of uncertainty; of loneliness; of isolation; even of fear. We know, perhaps like never before, what it means to be afraid, as the darkness of night descends upon the world.

---

<sup>1</sup> John 13: 21, 26, 30

For many, night, especially this night, the fear is all too real.

But if night is a time of uncertainty; of loneliness; of isolation; of fear, it is also a time of watching. Scripture and the Christian tradition is full of references to keeping watch by night. The shepherds at Bethlehem kept watch by night<sup>2</sup>, as did the boy Samuel<sup>3</sup>, and Jesus himself.<sup>4</sup> The season of Advent is a time of watching, as we watch for the coming of Christ in time as the Babe of Bethlehem, and at the end of time, as the merciful Judge and Redeemer. In monastic tradition, the night is a particular time of prayer, when all is quiet, and heaven and earth seem very close to one another. At those times, night can be that thin place, when we are invited to watch for the movement of God.

One of the wonderful traditions associated with Maundy Thursday is precisely that, to keep watch, as a response to Jesus' invitation to *stay awake* and watch,<sup>5</sup> in company with Him. Often that is done in a beautifully decorated chapel, before the Sacrament, that will be used for Holy Communion on Good Friday. Here at the monastery we Brothers take it in turns to keep watch before the Sacrament throughout the night.

But tonight, so many are watching, not in a beautifully decorated chapel, before the Sacrament, or in anticipation of the fulfillment of a promised coming of God, but at a painful distance, unable to see or even to touch, as someone they love gasps for breath.

Night, especially this night, for many is a time of painful, and lonely watching.

But if night is a time of watching, it is also a time of encounter.

Again, Scripture is full of encounters which take place at night. We think of Nicodemus, who came to Jesus by night<sup>6</sup> and found in him the Teacher of Israel; and the shepherds who encountered the glory of God, as the angels sang their songs of peace and goodwill to all.<sup>7</sup> It would seem that those who watch, especially at night, are often rewarded, with sight and insight that does not come to us in the middle of the day.

---

<sup>2</sup> Luke 2: 8 - 9

<sup>3</sup> 1 Samuel 3: 1ff

<sup>4</sup> Luke 6: 12

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 26: 38

<sup>6</sup> John 3: 1ff

<sup>7</sup> Luke 2: 14

Night is a time of encounter, yet what so many encounter, especially perhaps this night, is not consolation and visions of peace, but sadness, and sorrow, and maybe even death.

But if night is a time of encounter, it is also a time of trust.

Night, is a time of trust. As it descends, we are invited to trust that the dawn will come, that day will break, that life will return. With each sunset, we are invited to trust that the sun will indeed rise on the morrow. Day after day, and night after night, we are invited to *lie down in peace, at once I fall asleep*<sup>8</sup>, trusting that a new day will come.

For many this night, perhaps also for you, trust, and especially trust in God, is in short supply. We don't know if tomorrow will come for ourselves, or someone we love, and so we lose our ability to trust, even to trust in God.

For many people all over the world, it is night, and we are all overwhelmed by a sense of uncertainty; of loneliness; of isolation; of fear, as the world is plunged into darkness.

Yet for Jesus, the answer to the darkness of Maundy Thursday is not fear, but love. *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 disciple, if you have love for one another.*<sup>9</sup>

As the world is plunged into darkness, Jesus stands among us, inviting us not to fear, but to love.

Our **Rule of Life** reminds us that *[the] beloved disciple did not hide from the suffering of Christ at Golgotha but took his stand there with Mary. By being steadfast together at the cross, enduring all that others found unbearable, they remained in Jesus' love. If we abide in that perfect love shown on the cross we will receive the grace to face together all that we are tempted to run from in fear.*<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Psalm 4: 8

<sup>9</sup> John 13: 34 - 35

<sup>10</sup> SSJE, *Rule of Life, Our Dedication to the Disciple Whom Jesus Loved*, chapter 2, page 5

It is night, and we are afraid, but the promise of the gospel is that Easter will come, the sun will rise, dawn will break, and like Mary Magdalene, we will see the Risen Lord.

Night can be a terrible time. It can be a time of uncertainty; of loneliness; of isolation; of fear. And who among us does not feel those things tonight, especially perhaps this night. You are not alone in your feelings. The whole world is afraid. And into this fear, Jesus speaks words of love, *love one another, just as I have loved you.*

What will get us through this time of disease, death, and darkness is not fear, but love; not isolation, but love; not loneliness, but love; not uncertainty; but love.

If you find yourself afraid tonight, you are not alone, and so ask to know that love of Jesus who calls us to *love one another, just as He has loved you.*

If you find yourself isolated tonight, you are not alone, and so ask to know that love of Jesus who calls us to *love one another, just as He has loved you.*

If you find yourself lonely tonight, you are not alone, and so ask to know that love of Jesus who calls us to *love one another, just as He has loved you.*

If you find yourself uncertain tonight, you are not alone, and so ask to know that love of Jesus who calls us to *love one another, just as He has loved you.*

If you find yourself wanting to run in fear, you are not alone, and so ask to know that love of Jesus who calls us to *love one another, just as He has loved you.*

Perhaps unlike any Maundy Thursday in our life time, this Maundy Thursday has a poignancy like never before. Tonight the fear is palpable. The watching is real. The encounter with God who calms our fears, and brings health and wholeness to the sick, and new life to the dead, so desperately longed for. The trust in such short supply.

Like those first disciples, we can chose to run from all that we find unbearable. Or we can choose to love.

It is love, and not fear that will give us the courage to face the uncertainty, loneliness, and isolation that is gripping our hearts tonight. It is love, and not fear,

that will settle our jitters and allow us to watch calmly, and expectantly, trusting that dawn will break, the sun will rise, and Easter will come.

It is love, and not fear that will help us to *understand what God gives and reveals through Jesus. The beloved disciple understood that the pouring out of water and blood from Jesus' side signified the giving of the Spirit. Love will open our eyes to the Spirit's power in the sacraments, in prayer, in action and service. He went into the empty tomb, and believed at once in the mystery of the resurrection. Love will make us men of faith who know God's power to bring life out of death. The beloved disciple recognized the Lord in the stranger by the shore. Love will expand our ability to know him in all persons, in all things and in all places.*<sup>11</sup>

Tonight, perhaps more than any other time in our lives, we know, and the world knows, that *it is night*. Yet into the darkness of our night, Jesus stands and speaks to us a word of love: *love one another*, he says, *just as I have loved you*.

The promise of the gospel in the darkness of this night is that dawn will break, the sun will rise, Easter will come, and love will act, to calm our fears, bring health, and wholeness to the sick, and new life to the dead, and one day, like Mary Magdalene, we will be able to proclaim to all the world, *I have seen the Lord*,<sup>12</sup> for in the darkness of this night, we will have seen love.

---

<sup>11</sup> SSJE, *Rule of Life, Our Dedication to the Disciple Whom Jesus Loved*, chapter 2, page 5

<sup>12</sup> John 20: 18