

“How the Night Begins”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
John 13:1-17
February 25, 2018
Second Sunday in Lent

There are nights you never forget. The nights in which you find yourself unnaturally awake because of what is happening around you or to you or to one you cherish.

Maybe the phone call came just as you were drifting off. Maybe a long drive on an eerily quiet highway followed. Maybe you never left the house, but stayed up in the room with them as they lingered in the liminal space between worlds. Maybe someone held your hand as you fought an up and down battle, all fevers and fits and flashes of pain. Maybe you kept within arm’s distance of them as they wrestled with fear and hopelessness. Maybe you were there as she brought new life into this world, in a whirl of emotions and noises.

Whatever the circumstance, you realized at some point that it would be one of those nights that would get a full chapter in the book about you. As the sun crept over the horizon, the long night of waiting for joy or aching for answers or hoping for release or praying for strength turned into a dawn unlike any you’d seen before. The rest of the world woke up, completely unaware of the night you’d had, of all that had changed in the dark.

This was the night the disciples would never forget. When dawn breaks, the rooster will crow and poor Peter — but that’s next week’s story. The day that follows will be the worst. There will be shouting and and a long walk and nails and agony. The night that comes before the hardest day will be spent in the courtyard outside the house of the high priest awaiting word, and in the garden encountering betrayal, and at this meal where he will pray for them. The night they will never forget begins this way: with him washing their feet.

I have mentioned over the past weeks how the Gospel of John starts with “In the beginning” and races through cosmic time to slow down enough to give us a couple years of Jesus’s life, and then it slows way down in this last week. Twice before, the Passover has been mentioned in this gospel. First, Jesus went to Jerusalem at Passover, right after the wedding at Cana, and stormed into the temple and turned over tables and drove the money changers out. A year later, as the Passover approached, he was up on the Sea of Galilee, and there he fed five thousand and walked on water and called himself the bread of the world just as houses were being cleared of leaven.

Here, at the third Passover in John, Jesus has come to Jerusalem despite the threat he and his disciples know awaits them there. The threat is closer than the disciples realize. It is imminent. It is hours away. It is in the room with them. Jesus knows this, and as this night begins, we might imagine a dozen different ways he could commence his last evening. I wonder what I would do tonight if I knew I would die tomorrow and that one of my friends would help make it happen. Jesus begins the night by comforting his friends and preparing them to love as he loved. And so he washes their feet.

They must have known something was up when he got up from dinner. But only Judas would have known that betrayal had a place set at the table. This betrayal, this brewing conspiracy between those who sought to quiet him and one who followed him, this evil, this terribleness — it believes itself to be in control of this situation.

Judas will betray Jesus this very night and bring the men to the garden to arrest him. Jesus will be silenced and the problems he has caused will dissipate and the veracity of the value of power and status and empire will be confirmed. Equilibrium will return to Jerusalem. The commoners will fall back in line. The peace of Rome will be kept.

Except betrayal and conspiracy and evil and terribleness are not actually in control of any of this. That truth will be clear when we end this Lenten journey five weeks from today. But even here, as this night begins, betrayal might be at the table and close enough to breathe down Jesus's back, but it is love that is firmly in control.

Jesus knows whose feet he washes. He washes Thomas's feet, the one who sarcastically said they'd all be serving a death sentence to follow their rabbi back to Jerusalem, but who came anyway. And he washes Peter's feet. Peter, the one who never quite gets it, at least not yet. Peter, who can't see what Jesus is doing here. First Peter is confused. Washing feet is surely beneath Jesus. It is servant's work. And we want to say, "C'mon, Pete, I think that's kind of what he's going for." But we have to remember that Peter doesn't know how the story ends. He has followed this man for a couple of years and seen signs and heard things that all point to who this Jesus is. And even if you're understanding of the Messiah, the Anointed, the Christ, the one sent from God includes this one being a servant, it's a different thing entirely when that one makes a move to wash your dirty feet. It's not just a nice theological concept anymore, the Servant Lord. This man, this rabbi, this doer of signs and speaker of truth, this one who plucked you out of your fishing village, this one wants to wash your feet from the grime of the path on which he has led you.

Jesus rebukes Peter, and well, *Peter gonna Peter*, and so he says, "Okay! Do my hands and my head too!" He misses it again. This is not a magical act of blessing that you can accumulate and splash around in and hoard like the pieces of chocolate you keep in that drawer you think nobody else knows about. This is an act of simple foot washing, simple servanthood, simple gentleness and care. And this is an act of immense love, of the Word incarnate turning over the tables of social propriety to take on the role of a lowly servant, to provide a cleansing both physical and spiritual as the terrible night that leads to the terrible day begins.

Jesus knows whose feet he washes. He washes Judas, not with anger or irony, but with love. Before we hear that Judas' heart had already been turned, we hear that Jesus "loved them to the end." And so he washes the feet of the one who would betray him, and if betrayal and evil and conspiracy had any sense, they would have fled right then and there. They would have looked through the eyes of Judas and seen love washing his feet and they wouldn't have pitied love and smirked and nailed it to a tree. They would have crumbled at the inevitably everlasting nature of such love being poured out. They would have hightailed it for the wilderness.

I wonder where you have encountered such love. I have felt it this week, in members of this congregation patiently visiting one of our senior members in the hospital and abiding with him as he wrestles through days that feel like long nights. I got to see this love yesterday in a gloriously fun wedding in which a new family was formed on the principle that love should be thrown at every problem as if it were abundant and holy and more useful than duct tape. I heard it on Friday night in Tuscaloosa as the Stillman College Choir turned a routine Presbyterian worship service into a mystically musically miracle. I wonder where you have found it.

I bet you have seen such love poured out, poured out upon those who doubt that they can trust such love and those who don't understand the nature of the love and those who are actively working to undermine the love. I know that all of you have poured out love in such ways.

It's true that Jesus tells the disciples to do what he has done. So keep washing feet where you find them. Go looking for them. Wash clueless feet and bitter feet and wonderfully appreciative feet. Heck, maybe even actually physically wash someone's feet. If you do that, let me know!

It's also true that one of the lessons of this story is to let your feet be washed. We're going to sing a hymn about this at the end of the service, but letting a neighbor — much less God! — serve you can be incredibly difficult. The truth is that y'all are awfully generous and kind and patient. And that can make you fairly poor at accepting blessings from others. Someone tries to wash your feet, and suddenly you're saying, "Oh no, I'm good. You don't need to do that. I, uh, I just washed my feet. Yeah, that's it. That's the ticket. No need here." Or you question their motive. Or you feel guilty. Or you just feel awkward. And of course you do. But stopping someone from blessing you with an act of kindness or a gift or a sign of genuine love is getting in the way of their attempt to do as Jesus said. Love is awkward sometimes, and sometimes it tickles your toes.

Let's not forget when Jesus does this particular sign of awkward love and socially unacceptable servanthood. He does it at the start of the night they won't ever forget — the night that two thousand years haven't been able to forget. He does it to prepare them for the worst. He does it to prepare them for being betrayed by one of their own. He does it to prepare them to be the one who betrays. He does it to prepare them for the moment that dawn breaks and the rooster crows. He does it to prepare them for the shouting and the long walk and the nails and the death and the emptiness. That's how this night begins. When the night looms large, wash feet, and let yours be washed. And rejoice, for love is in control

He does it to prepare them for the night. They will look back and realize what he did to prepare them for the worst.

Ah, but by that time, they will also see that this act of servanthood, this defiant, extravagant act of love was also to prepare them for everything they would need to do after the dawn after the dawn after the dawn broke, and the tomb was empty, and everything had changed, and they had to run and tell a sleepy world what had happened. Amen.