

**The World-Changing Week**

**Thursday**

**Open**

As you reflect on your own life, can you identify a "most significant moment" -- a turning point that made a transformative difference in the way the rest of it went? I bet we could all find a moment like that.  
  
It feels strange to ask whether Jesus had one – he was born Son of God, after all; but surely, he had them too. Was it that time at age 12 when he hung out in the Temple questioning the leaders, while his family headed out of Jerusalem? Or the moment he decided to make his way to the Jordan and get dunked by John the Baptist? Or the first time his healing power broke out? Or was it that Thursday evening of his last week on earth, when he ate a surreal last meal with friends he knew would betray, deny, and abandon him; then wrapped a towel around his waist and scrubbed his disciples' feet; and then prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane for God to change the plan, but finally consented to the way of the cross?

**Hearing the Story**

**A Prior Anointing.** A 19th-century German Bible scholar named Martin Kahler famously called the Gospel of Mark “a Passion Story with an extended introduction.” This is partly because Jesus’ crucifixion doesn’t just come up on his last Friday. It is foreshadowed throughout the story.

* As far back as Mark 3.6, the Pharisees and Herodians begin to plot Jesus’ demise.
* Three different times – Mark 8.31-33; 9.30-32; 10.32-34 – Jesus predicts his death to his disciples. (By the way, they never quite catch on!)
* We saw last session that while Jesus was teaching outside the Temple, the Jewish Leaders had hoped to arrest him, but could not, because they feared the crowds (Mark 12.12).

In Bethany, just outside Jerusalem, as Jesus begins to walk the dark steps toward his death, a woman pours expensive perfume on Jesus and wipes his feet with her hair and tears. The Pharisees are appalled. Jesus sees it otherwise: She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial (14.8).”

**Room Arrangements.**

When it comes time to book a room for the Passover feast, Jesus’ instructions to his disciples sound spy-like: “Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, ‘The Teacher asks, where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?’ He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there.” This is the stuff of secret rendezvous and coded messages. We’ve already seen that Jesus has made enemies in Jerusalem. Here he seems to plot a dinner plan that will dodge danger. He has contacts.

**Washing Feet, Commanding Love, Assuring Peace, Praying Unity**

John’s Gospel does Thursday night differently than the others. While Matthew, Mark, and Luke focus on the supper, John rivets on the last words Jesus spoke to his disciples. His telling lasts five chapters. We’ll only have space and time for a flyover here, though we could have spent all of Lent on these remarkable moments Jesus shares with his disciples.

* Jesus washes the disciple’s feet and tells them to do likewise. (13.1-20)
* He then gives them a “New Commandment” (*novum mandatum* in Latin, and why we call this Maundy Thursday): “Love one another, as I have loved you, so you must love one another. All people will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.” (13.34-35)
* Jesus promises to prepare a place for them where he is going. (14.1-14)
* To bewildered and scared disciples, Jesus says, “I will not leave you orphaned, but I’ll send the Holy Spirit to be with you.” (14.18-31)
* Jesus pictures himself as the Vine and so identifies the disciple’s best life: “Abide in me and you will bear fruit!” (15.5)
* He pictures hardship ahead for them and reassures them of his presence. (15.18-26)
* He reiterates to the disciples that, despite the world’s harsh treatment of them, they need not fear, because (against all the appearances of an excruciating Thursday night and a dark Friday) he has conquered the world. (16)
* Jesus finishes with his “High Priestly Prayer” for his disciples, asking God to glorify him through the cross and to continue with them as they live out his mission.
* In a final moment of prayer, he pleads with God to help them be “one” as the Father and Son/Creator and Redeemer are one.

This dense five-chapter session lives on with us, just as much a guide to our discipleship as it was to theirs.

**The Passover Feast.**

Bread is a staple food for many cultures. It was certainly central to the Passover Feast, which is called “The Festival of Unleavened Bread.” The instructions come from Moses: “On the first day you shall hold a solemn assembly, and on the seventh day a solemn assembly; no work shall be done on those days; only what everyone must eat, that alone may be prepared by you. 17You shall observe the festival of unleavened bread, for on this very day I brought your companies out of the land of Egypt: you shall observe this day throughout your generations as a perpetual ordinance (Exodus 12.6).”

So, when Jesus and his disciples gathered to eat that Thursday evening, they weren’t alone. The festival of unleavened bread was being celebrated all around Jerusalem. But history set this specific room and meal apart.

One part of that uniqueness came in Jesus’ solemn prediction that his betrayer was sharing the meal with him. Imagine yourself as Jesus, serving and loving all twelve, even knowing what lay ahead.

*When it was evening, he came with the twelve. And when they had taken their places and were eating, Jesus said, ‘Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me.’ They began to be distressed and to say to him one after another, ‘Surely, not I?’ He said to them, ‘It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the bowl with me. For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.’*

The supper went on. The words are familiar to us. Imagine yourself as one of the disciples, already accustomed to the familiar words of Passover, but hearing Jesus’ self-referential words for the first time. Would you have understood?

*While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, ‘Take; this is my body.’ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, ‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.’* (Mark 14.12-21)

The seventeenth-century English pastor, George Herbert, wrote a poem titled “Love III” that captures one aspect of this meal’s message.

**Love III**

George Herbert

Love bade me welcome, yet my soul drew back,

        Guilty of dust and sin.

But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack

        From my first entrance in,

Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning

        If I lack'd anything.

"A guest," I answer'd, "worthy to be here";

        Love said, "You shall be he."

"I, the unkind, the ungrateful? ah my dear,

        I cannot look on thee."

Love took my hand and smiling did reply,

        "Who made the eyes but I?"

"Truth, Lord, but I have marr'd them; let my shame

        Go where it doth deserve."

"And know you not," says Love, "who bore the blame?"

        "My dear, then I will serve."

"You must sit down," says Love, "and taste my meat."

        So I did sit and eat.

**Singing**

We skip the hymn. When we walk our holy week or even when we read the story, most of us imagine Jesus at table with the disciples, then walking those heavy steps to Gethsemane, where he will pray and be betrayed, then on trial, denied by Peter.

But there was a hymn. Mark writes, “When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.” (14.26) Only recently I’ve learned that we can be almost certain what song Jesus and his disciples sang. By the first century, the Hallal (Psalm 113—118) had become part of all Jewish feast days, and it especially featured on Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. By the time they left dinner, they would have sung out the last of these six psalms. Take a moment to read Psalm 118 within this loaded Thursday evening – Jesus’ last full day on earth before his crucifixion.

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;  
     his steadfast love endures forever!

**2**Let Israel say,  
     “His steadfast love endures forever.”  
**3**Let the house of Aaron say,  
     “His steadfast love endures forever.”  
**4**Let those who fear the Lord say,  
     “His steadfast love endures forever.”

**5**Out of my distress I called on the Lord;  
     the Lord answered me and set me in a broad place.  
**6**With the Lord on my side I do not fear.  
     What can mortals do to me?  
**7**The Lord is on my side to help me;  
     I shall look in triumph on those who hate me.  
**8**It is better to take refuge in the Lord  
     than to put confidence in mortals.  
**9**It is better to take refuge in the Lord  
     than to put confidence in princes.

**10**All nations surrounded me;  
     in the name of the Lord I cut them off!  
**11**They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side;  
     in the name of the Lord I cut them off!  
**12**They surrounded me like bees;  
     they blazed[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+118&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-15882a)] like a fire of thorns;  
    in the name of the Lord I cut them off!  
**13**I was pushed hard,[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+118&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-15883b)] so that I was falling,  
     but the Lord helped me.  
**14**The Lord is my strength and my might;  
     he has become my salvation.

**15**There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous:

“The right hand of the Lord does valiantly;  
**16**    the right hand of the Lord is exalted;  
    the right hand of the Lord does valiantly.”

**17**I shall not die, but I shall live,  
     and recount the deeds of the Lord.  
**18**The Lord has punished me severely,  
     but he did not give me over to death.

**19**Open to me the gates of righteousness,  
     that I may enter through them  
     and give thanks to the Lord.

**20**This is the gate of the Lord;  
     the righteous shall enter through it.

**21**I thank you that you have answered me  
     and have become my salvation.  
**22**The stone that the builders rejected  
     has become the chief cornerstone.  
**23**This is the Lord’s doing;  
     it is marvelous in our eyes.  
**24**This is the day that the Lord has made;  
     let us rejoice and be glad in it.[[c](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+118&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-15894c)]  
**25**Save us, we beseech you, O Lord!  
     O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!

**26**Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.[[d](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+118&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-15896d)]  
     We bless you from the house of the Lord.  
**27**The Lord is God,  
     and he has given us light.  
Bind the festal procession with branches,  
     up to the horns of the altar.[[e](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+118&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-15897e)]

**28**You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;  
     you are my God, I will extol you.

**29**O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,  
     for his steadfast love endures forever.

**The Prayer**

It is human frailty Jesus battles in the Garden of Gethsemane. It’s one thing to know suffering lies ahead; entirely another to face it when it arrives. No wonder Jesus is “deeply grieved, to the point of death.” Perhaps for the first time, on the eve of his crucifixion, he feels the full weight of his mission.

His prayer is intimate and honest. “Abba, Father…remove this cup from me!” Luke captures the intensity of Jesus’ anguish, as “his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground (Luke 22.44).” Like the psalmists he has read since youth, he cries out honestly to God: “Remove this cup!”

Then something changes in Jesus. Some of us have experienced anguished prayer and know the breaking point, when our heart changes. Jesus once taught his disciples to pray, “Your Kingdom come, your will be done (Matthew 6.10).” In the face of his own suffering, he remembers those words here: “Not what I want, but what you want!”

Jesus’ anguish at Gethsemane is extreme! But anything less might have given him less access to us. Years later, a Christian author pondered Jesus’ anguish: “Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested (Hebrews 2.18).” Amazing love!

“Not what I want, but what you want!”

Ella Wheeler Wilcox knows in her bones and in her poem that we all face our own Gethsemane.

**Gethsemane**

Ella Wheeler Wilcox

In golden youth when seems the earth

A Summer-land of singing mirth,

When souls are glad and hearts are light,

And not a shadow lurks in sight,

We do not know it, but there lies

Somewhere veiled under evening skies

A garden which we all must see --

The garden of Gethsemane.

With joyous steps we go our ways,

Love lends a halo to our days;

Light sorrows sail like clouds afar,

We laugh and say how strong we are.

We hurry on; and hurrying, go

Close to the border-land of woe,

That waits for you, and waits for me --

Forever waits Gethsemane.

Down shadowy lanes, across strange streams,

Bridged over by our broken dreams;

Behind the misty caps of years,

Beyond the great salt fount of tears,

The garden lies. Strive as you may,

You cannot miss it in your way.

All paths that have been, or shall be,

Pass somewhere through Gethsemane.

All those who journey, soon or late,

Must pass within the garden's gate;

Must kneel alone in darkness there,

And battle with some fierce despair.

God pity those who cannot say,

“Not mine but thine,” who only pray,

“Let this cup pass,” and cannot see

The *purpose* in Gethsemane.

Is the poet right about you? Have you ever consciously faced a fork in the road: one road easy, the other road good? Describe it. How did you decide which road to take? Do you ever pray, “Not what I want, God, but what you want”?

**Denial**

While we don’t know much about Jesus’ relationship with Judas, but we know that Jesus had great plans for Peter. They must have been quite close. Peter is the first follower named (Mark 1.16), the first house where Jesus healed and exorcised people was Peter’s mother-in-law’s home, (Mark 1.29-30), Jesus called Peter out of the boat to walk on water with him, (Mark) – to name a few. Matthew even shares a scene where Jesus calls Peter (Greek *PETRA* = rock) “the rock” on which he will build his church. (Matthew 16.13-16) If not Jesus’ best friend, Peter must have at least been on the short list.

Yet on that Thursday night, two things happened: first, after supper Jesus saw and shared – against Peter’s vehement protestations – that Peter would grow weak under pressure. Then, after Judas handed Jesus over, Peter did indeed wilt before the accusation of a powerful…slave girl. Imagine the angst for them both – for Peter, facing the fact that he denied knowing the One he’d left his life to follow, and for Jesus, being disowned by his dear friend.

By now, we can feel the darkness of that Thursday night. The cumulative weight of an anointing appropriate to burial, Jesus’ mealtime prediction of his betrayal, his prayer in the garden sweating bullets, betrayal by one of his disciples, and denial by his favorite cannot have been anything less than excruciating for Jesus. Perhaps that’s why one traditional form for Maundy Thursday worship has been called Tenebrae – the Latin word for darkness – and features the extinguishing, candle by candle, of all the light in the room.

**Close – From Darkness to Light**

There’s a reason we keep walking our Holy Week journey. Stopping after Thursday would leave us in a state of hopeless grief, and so we walk through Friday and on to the brilliant rays of Jesus’ Sunday morning explosion out of the tomb. But without walking Thursday, we cannot fathom the love behind it. Without standing at Friday’s cross, we would never see the truth that there’s nowhere in all the cosmos that God would not reach to bring us home.

Keep walking!

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