

Maundy Thursday
April 2, 2015
Isaiah 49:7-13

“Singing with the Exiles: He Prepares a Table”

This evening marks the conclusion of the 40-day Lenten season. We now enter into the sacred mystery of Christ’s suffering, death and resurrection called *Triduum*, or the Three Days of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Vigil and Day. Together with fellow believers throughout all the world, we gather together to hear in faith again the great story of all that God in Christ has done for us through his innocent suffering and death upon the cross, and through his glorious resurrection from the dead. All this unfolds over these next days as one worship experience flows seamlessly into the next. And it begins this evening as we mark Jesus’ institution of that holy meal we call the Lord’s Supper, even as we heard in the Gospel lesson (Mark 14:12-26). The name for this day is sometimes called “Holy Thursday,” but Lutherans have usually called it “Maundy Thursday.” That strange name “Maundy” coming from the Latin words, *novum mandatum*, meaning “new commandment” – Jesus’ new commandment that his followers **“love one another as I have loved you... By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another”** (John 13:34-35). Maundy Thursday is all about the table which Jesus has prepared and to which He invites you and me to come and receive him as He comes to us under bread and wine, giving us his very Body and Blood for us and for our salvation. Our Lenten preaching focus, “Singing with the Exiles,” based on Isaiah 40-55, continues this evening based on that Old Testament lesson read from Isaiah 49:7-13 under the theme “He Prepares a Table.” May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

That theme, “He Prepares a Table,” probably makes us think of Psalm 23, which speaks of how the Lord is my shepherd, and how He **“prepares a table before me...”** Here in Isaiah 49, the word “shepherd” doesn’t actually appear, but there are strong shepherding words that do appear – words like *feed*, *pasture*, *lead* and *guide*. The Shepherd here in Isaiah 49 is that **“one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation, the servant of rulers”** (Isaiah 49:7). We will hear more tomorrow on Good Friday about that Servant of the Lord who **“was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised and we esteemed him not”** (Isaiah 53:3). This Servant of the Lord, though despised and rejected, is the Good Shepherd. He leads his flock to find grass on barren heights and **“they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them”** (Isaiah 49:10). The Servant of the Lord, the Good Shepherd, cares for his scattered flock wherever they may be, and prepares a table for them all, including his flock here in this place. Isaiah’s words about the Servant of the Lord and the Good Shepherd are fulfilled in Jesus, who is both the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29) and the Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:15).

So, you and I are sheep then – not a very complimentary thing when you get down to it. Sheep aren’t very intimidating animals, right? They’re cute and cuddly, but not very intimidating. Think of NFL teams that do have animal names: Chicago Bears, Detroit Lions, Denver Broncos, Cincinnati Bengals. You’ve got your lions, tigers and bears! Now these are intimidating animals! Odds are that there won’t be NFL expansion teams with names like the LA Lambs or the San Antonio Sheep. What would cheers for these teams sound like? “Fleece ‘em, Fleece ‘em, ba, ba, ba!” Nope – that doesn’t work so well. Sheep are dumb, dirty and defenseless. They’re dumb because they will just graze on the same hills until those hills are overgrazed and reduced to wasteland. They bend down to drink from a pond, get too close so that their wool absorbs the water, weighing them down, and they fall in and drown. We’re not dumb like that, are we? Sheep are dirty – their wool is a magnet for mud, manure and maggots. It gets caked with dirt and decay – nasty! We’re not like that, are we? And sheep are defenseless. They are easy prey for wild animals, and if they fall onto their back, they can’t get up. We’re not like that, are we?

The Word of the Lord in Isaiah is very clear that Israel, his chosen people, were dumb, dirty and defenseless like sheep. But we're different, right? We have our act together. We're intelligent people who know what's what. Or do we? In Good Friday worship tomorrow, we will hear this passage from Isaiah 53: **"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – every one – to his own way"** (Isaiah 53:6). And that is true, so true, in the very individualistic culture in which we live, we have turned, every one, to his or her own way. Having left God's way, the result is that we are exiles from our heavenly home – exiles who are dumb, dirty and defenseless sheep – sheep who need to be rescued, cared for, and protected. They need a shepherd – a good Shepherd! Again, Isaiah 53 points us to that Servant of the Lord, who **"like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth"** (Isaiah 53:7). This is Jesus, who is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29) and the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:15).

On this Maundy Thursday night, events began to unfold quickly in Jesus' life. After celebrating the Passover with the disciples, they went to the Mount of Olives where Jesus would be betrayed by one of his own. He would be arrested and brought to trial on trumped up charges, sentenced to death, handed over to be humiliated and abused, scourged and paraded before the people who jeered at him, forced to carry the cross on which he would die. In all of this, the spotless and beautiful wool of Jesus the Lamb of God would be caked and smeared with the filth and stench of our sin. There would be no quiet waters for this Shepherd, but instead his lips would be cracked and swollen, and his throat parched. There would be no rod or staff to comfort him. His cup would surely overflow – not with blessings but with the curse of God Almighty's righteous anger for our disobedience and rebellion that he took upon himself. And Jesus would drink this cup to the full. **"He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have not returned to the Shepherd and Overseer [Bishop] of your souls"** (1 Peter 2:24-25).

The Shepherd and Servant of the Lord promises that his sheep will not hunger or thirst (Isaiah 49:10), and He does this here as He prepares a table – his table and his supper. He invites us to come with all our burdens, problems, cares and concerns and find refreshment, blessing, peace and new life here. He satisfies our hunger and quenches our thirst with gifts that we can find nowhere else; gifts that money cannot buy and good works cannot purchase. These gifts are Jesus' very Body and Blood, given and shed for you. Come with repentant joy to receive your Good Shepherd. Come, for all things are now ready. Amen.