

I

This winter and spring, we've been reading and preaching our way through the gospel of John. We haven't gone verse by verse, but we've followed the linear arc of the story that John tells us about Jesus, starting with chapter one right after Christmas, and leaving off in chapter 11 last Sunday.

More than any other gospel writer, John often sets his stories about Jesus in relationship to a major Jewish festival or holiday, and there was no bigger holiday in ancient Judaism than the festival of Passover.

Every year to this very day, faithful Jews around the world commemorate events recounted in the Book of Exodus, when God's people were enslaved in the land of Egypt. God told the people to slaughter a lamb at sundown, and to sprinkle the lamb's blood on the doorposts and lintels of their houses. That night, the angel of the Lord passed through the land of Egypt and struck dead the firstborn of every living thing in Egypt, both animal and human, but the angel of the Lord passed over the houses that were marked with the lamb's blood. The next morning, the Egyptian king and the people of Egypt were so distraught terrified that they begged God's people to leave, even giving them jewelry and silver and gold and fine clothing to take with them.

The story of Passover is a powerful story. It's the story of the liberation of an oppressed people, the story of a sudden and radical reversal of fortunes. And in Jesus' day, every year,

thousands of faithful Jews made the pilgrimage from all over the world to Jerusalem to mark the holy day.

Passover was not a holiday that Pontius Pilate celebrated. Pontius Pilate was not a Jew. He was the Roman governor who had been appointed to oversee Rome's interests in the region. He had two standing order from Rome – keep the tax revenues rolling in, and keep the peace by whatever means necessary. And in order to fulfill those standing orders, Pilate was given command of some of the best trained and best equipped soldiers anywhere in the world.

Generally, Pontius Pilate didn't like to spend much time in Jerusalem. A few years before he became governor, one of the Jewish client kings by the name of Herod had overseen the construction of a proper Roman city on the coast, and he named it after the Emperor, calling it Caesarea Maritima. Caesarea Maritima had a proper Roman amphitheater, a track for chariot races, a breakwater for loading and unloading cargo bound for Rome, and for the governor, a beautiful Roman palace overlooking the sea. That's where Pilate spent most of his time.

But every year, thousands of Jews came to Jerusalem to commemorate the Passover, this story of liberation, this story of radical reversal, this story of the victory and liberation of the oppressed. And so every year, to ensure that Rome's interests were protected and that security was maintained, Pilate was

obligated to go up to Jerusalem, high up in the Judean hills.

And so I imagine that as the sun began to set once again on Passover, as Jews began to gather around tables all over the city and to ask the age-old question, “What makes this night different than any other night?” Pilate and his officers stood on the balcony of his headquarters in Jerusalem and looked out over the city.

I imagine they reviewed once again their security plans for the festival of Passover. There would be extra soldiers, extra checkpoints, and reserve units ready to respond with overwhelming force at the first sign of trouble. For Pilate and his Roman soldiers who occupied Judea, Passover was not a holy day or a festival, but a threat.

Across town, in an upper room, a rabbi was gathering for the evening meal with his disciples. They, too, could feel the tension in the city. They knew that their rabbi was a wanted man and that the authorities were already conspiring together to try to have him killed. In fact, just days before, they had begged Jesus to stay out of Judea altogether. But Jesus was undeterred, and so Thomas had said, “Let us go with him, that we might die with him.” So here they were in Jerusalem once again, ready to mark the Passover.

For three years, they had walked with their rabbi all over the land. They had tasted the rich, good wine during the wedding feast at Cana in Galilee. On another Passover years before, they had

cringed at the crack of the whip as Jesus drove the moneychangers and their animals out of the Jerusalem Temple. They had smelled death at the entrance of the tomb of their friend Lazarus on the day Jesus raised him again from the dead. They had seen and heard so much.

So as they gathered that Passover night in Jerusalem, perhaps they were wondering if Jesus was about to pull off something even bigger.

But none of them were prepared for what happened next.

So with that background in mind, I invite you to listen for a Word from God from John 13:1-17.

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus answered, 'You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' Peter said to him, 'You will never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.' Simon Peter said to

him, ‘Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!’ Jesus said to him, ‘One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.’ For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, ‘Not all of you are clean.’

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, ‘Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

II

That night, as the sun began to set, in different parts of the city of Jerusalem, two leaders gathered with their subordinates and prepared for the Passover that was to come. Two leaders who were under orders from on high, two leaders who had been appointed to their positions of leadership. Two leaders who felt the weight of the history of their people upon their shoulders. Two leaders, gathered in upper rooms a few blocks apart in the ancient city of Jerusalem, preparing for the Passover that was to come.

Two leaders offering us two very different models of leadership.

One scholar offers this concise definition of leadership: Leadership is the art of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive.

Pontius Pilate and his officers certainly had a tough challenge to tackle. Occupation is a hazardous undertaking, whether it’s in first-century Palestine or 21-st century Europe.

Pilate had been trained in and learned a leadership model that mobilizes people by relying on positional authority, threat of force, and, if necessary, violence. It’s a leadership model that humans have used for a very long time, one that is still in use in many places to this very day. Pilate had learned to use the tools the Empire provided him, and he used them well, including the threat of the ultimate sanction – execution by crucifixion.

But Jesus offers us an alternative. Jesus leads not with the tools of spear and sword, but with washbasin and towel. When Jesus kneels at the feet of his subordinates, including the one whom he knew would betray him, and washes their dirty feet, Jesus turns all of our notions about power and position completely upside down.

No wonder the disciples were scandalized, and if we’re honest, so are we! In most places in this world, in most systems, in most institutions, in most relationships, this is just not how things are done. Never in a million years would a Roman governor have countenanced

the idea of washing the feet of a subordinate.

And that's the confounding thing about Jesus and his kingdom. In his kingdom, the one who is the greatest willingly becomes the least of all and servant of all. In his kingdom, the one who is the highest willingly becomes the lowest. In his kingdom the way up is down. In his kingdom, way to greatness not through accumulation of power, but through self-emptying love.

III

And so here's a truth, my friend. You are a leader. Somewhere in your life, you have some sort of leadership role. Maybe you are a leader in your workplace, or in your school, or in your neighborhood, or just in your home. But somewhere in your life, you have some sort of leadership role.

Sometime this week, you're going to be faced with a leadership challenge. You're going to have to figure out how to mobilize at least one other person to tackle a tough challenge and thrive.

And so when that challenge comes, I invite you to think again about these two leaders, gathered in their respective upper rooms with their colleagues. Think about the models of leadership they offer to you. And then, remember this.

You have been washed, and you are clean. Jesus knows what you're capable of, both the good and bad. And Jesus has washed your feet anyway. Jesus has washed your feet, not because of what you've said or not said, not

because of what you've done or not done, but simply because you belong to him, in life and in death, body and soul.

Jesus has washed your feet, not because of who you are or who you know or because of any earthly power or privilege you may hold, but simply because of who he is – the Messiah, the holy one of God, the one coming into the world.

Jesus knows all about you, my friend. All the good. And all the not so great. And all the bad. And Jesus has washed your feet anyway.

IV

That's why they call it amazing grace. And that grace, then, frees us and invites us to lay down the leadership tools of empire, and to pick up the leadership tools of the kingdom of God.

That grace frees us to put down all of our earthly notions of power and to pick up a towel and a washbasin and start scrubbing dirty feet.

For the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, the Alpha and the Omega, the firstborn of the dead, the firstborn of creation, the One in whom all of human history and all of human destiny meet, he has washed us.

And he says to us, "I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."

Thanks be to God. Amen.