

What to Do with Fear?
The Rev. Denise Schiavone

On Sunday, we read Luke's account of the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ. And though we know the story well, hopefully we heard and sensed anew the weight of our part, echoed in the people's cry: "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Now, we find ourselves at the start of the Triduum—the three holy days of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection. This evening, John takes us back to the period *before* Jesus' arrest and presentation to Pilate, to the setting of the Upper Room.

The scene is one to imagine: Jesus reclines at a long table alongside his disciples. They dip bread into bowls of oil and herbs, lick their fingers, savor the taste on their tongue. Clay vessels clink against one another. Oil lamps flicker in the shadows. Quiet conversation hums throughout the chambers, perhaps punctuated by occasional soft laughter.

Beneath this, though, lie an undercurrent of something else. The disciples have been hearing Jesus talk about his soul being troubled, about the hour drawing near. Earlier in John, Jesus speaks of a single seed dying in order to produce many seeds. The disciples may not fully understand, but surely, they must sense the darkness to come.

In the big experiences of life, those that remain with us always, we often miss the significance of the moment. In the thick of it, we may not respond as we'd hoped. But later, we can often reflect back on what we wish we'd said or done.

I wonder, how would the disciples remember that evening?

Would they fixate on Jesus' bombshell revelation that one of them—one of their very inner circle—would betray Jesus? Would they wish they'd asked more questions, or done something to change the course of things?

Would they recall the pitcher of water, the towel, their Lord and Savior stooping to wash their feet? Would they regret their hesitation to participate in that act: hesitation born of a sense of unworthiness, as verbalized by a shocked Peter, who proclaims, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?” Peter, who sees Jesus as at the top of the pecking order. The exalted King of Israel. Their long-awaited messiah.

Would the disciples think back to how they failed their friend and teacher soon after this night: John and James unable to keep watch as Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane, Judas fallen to the temptation of 30 pieces of silver, Peter’s repeated denials following Jesus’ arrest. Would they dwell on the debilitating fear they felt?

Or, would they focus on the details of that last meal? The sensation of sitting shoulder-to-shoulder. The sound of water splashing into a pitcher. The glow of light. Their Lord addressing them as “Little Children.” A scene of vulnerability and intimacy.

For me, the convergence of Jesus’ humanity and his divinity is never so apparent as in this scene. John tells us that on this night, Jesus *knew* his fate. Fully divine but also fully human, Jesus felt emotions as we do. Those who’ve ever been betrayed may have an idea of how Jesus felt this night. Those who’ve faced our own mortality or that of a loved one, may have an inkling of how Jesus felt. Jesus knew.

As he spends this evening cloistered in the Upper Room, Jesus *knows* what’s coming, and yet, he devotes his time and energies to his disciples—his friends. He teaches, he serves, he cleanses. Despite any fears he harbors, he offers them nothing less than the gift of his presence.

Whatever our imagining of the Last Supper, in the time and place we find ourselves at present, we may find ourselves drawn not to the intimacy of this scene, but rather, to the underlying themes of fear and impending doom. As we consider the suffering Jesus will endure this next three days, we may feel all too keenly our anguish over the devastating injustices we watch from a distance. Less than a year ago, it was frightened Afghan citizens trying desperately to flee their country. Today we watch in a similar state of shock and horror at the plight of the Ukrainian people.

In the face of such atrocities, we can of course opt to join causes and respond to calls to action. Preaching to the House of Bishops in mid-March, Bishop Michael Curry said, “Pray for Ukraine. Don’t give up on them...send money to the refugees...And there may be other things we can do, but do not abandon them without prayer. Pray. Pray for Ukraine. Pray for Russia. Pray for Putin, that unlike Pharaoh his hardened heart may be turned.”¹

During that session, the House of Bishops voted unanimously to issue statements condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Similar statements in support of the Afghan people were issued by Christian leaders last year.

Advocacy. Giving. Collective prayer. These are worthwhile endeavors, to be sure.

But in the midst of continuing crises and prolonged suffering, I still find myself awakening each morning and going to bed each night keenly aware of an undercurrent dwelling within me—an undercurrent of fear. Fear that many more innocent people will lose their lives, their loved ones, their homes. Fear that

¹ [The war in Ukraine – Episcopalians in Connection](#)

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things will never get better—and may even get worse. Fear that I can never do enough or be enough to make a real difference in this broken world.

So, the question remains for us as it did for the disciples on this fateful night: What are we to do we do with our fear? The kind of fear that can leave us crippled by feelings of unworthiness, powerlessness, hopelessness.

In today's Gospel, Jesus models a response for us, showing how even in times of unimaginable suffering, we can find solidarity—even joy—in surrendering to the gift of presence. We can accept that we are cleansed by the blood of Jesus, and strive to help cleanse each other—not only within our own faith communities, but also in tending to the wounds of the world: its rampant addictions, its pervasive poverty, its devastating violence.

Maundy Thursday brings us to the precipice of the space between recognizing our human limitations in response to suffering, and realizing our power to respond to suffering: the understanding that though in our humanity we continuously fall short, Jesus cleanses us, empowers us, and shows us the way forward. Maundy, meaning mandate: “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 disciples, if you have love for one another.”

This is the role of the Church in a world where Church as we know it is “dying.” This is the power of the Church in the face of atrocities we thought mankind had forever put behind us—things we told ourselves we would “never again” allow. Power that lies in acknowledging our fear, surrendering to God, and somehow finding the courage to stretch beyond our comfort zones, to show the world how to love.

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Finding such courage is not easy. I find it reassuring, though, that it was no easier for the early disciples. For Peter, who fumbled and faltered repeatedly, yet became the Rock upon which Jesus built his church. For James and John and others, who after Jesus's passion, went on to spread the Gospel far and wide, giving their lives to the Church.

What doors may be opened, when we find ways to move past our fears?

In these final moments of fellowship with his disciples, Jesus the man chose to put aside his fears, to model the healing power of presence. Jesus the Divine asks us to do the same. We may continue to experience fear, but we do not have to allow it to hold us in bondage. Jesus' surrender to the cross frees us to carry the Good News out into the world, empowering us to steadfastly offer compassion and care where humanity fails itself time and again.

As we move these next three days of darkness, let us sit with Jesus in his suffering. Let us embrace both the intimacy and the fear in the moment—and emerge standing before the empty tomb, more willing than ever to be Jesus' hands and feet in the world. Let us help each other claim the power in our discipleship and be in solidarity with our wounded brothers and sisters, here at home and across oceans. Let us find courage in the example of our Lord Jesus Christ: the Jesus who washes us clean and asks us to do the same for one another—the Jesus ever focused on sacrificial, serving, surrendering love.