

Maundy Thursday Online Service
United Church of Strafford, Vermont
<https://unitedchurchofstrafford.com/>

Blessing and Lighting of Candles

At the lighting of candles, Jews of Jesus day said a blessing, as Jews still do today. The night of the Last Supper Jesus probably said a seder candle blessing like this: *Barukh attah Adonai eloheinu melekh ha-olam, asher kideshanu bemitzvotav ve-tsivanu lehadlik ner shel yom tov.* “Blessed are you, Holy God, Ruler of the universe, who sanctify us with Your commandments, and command us to kindle the light of the holy day.”

Not many years later in the early Christian church they were singing a special hymn at the lighting of the candles for their evening services. It was called the Phos Hilaron in Greek. Its words went like this: O gracious light, pure brightness of the eternal creator in heaven, O Jesus Christ, holy and blessed! Now as we come to the setting of the sun, and our eyes behold your vespers light, we sing your praises, Holy God, One in Trinity. You are worthy at all times to be praised by happy voices, O Christ of God, O giver of life, and to be glorified through all the worlds. Amen.

Greeting and Announcements

Welcome to the United Church of Strafford Maundy Thursday service, commemorating the last eighteen hours of Jesus’ life including the last supper of Jesus with his disciples and the events that led from there to the crucifixion. It was a time when darkness triumphed on earth, a time when fear and greed and lust for power silenced goodness and truth, thinking that they were having the last word.

This service is full of ancient rituals and symbolic actions that people have done to keep the memory alive for almost two thousand years. It can give it a deeper meaning if you know certain things about it in advance, so here is a brief orientation. First, two definitions: the word Maundy comes from the Latin phrase, *mandatum novum*, meaning new commandment. Traditionally the first words of the Maundy Thursday foot-washing ritual came from John 13:34, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” We are not reenacting the foot washing, but we should remember that

Maundy Thursday is all about the love Jesus has for us, a love so great that he washes our feet, and dies on the cross. He calls us to have no less love for one another, even for the stranger or the wrong-doer or our enemy.

The other word to define is tenebrae. The traditional Tenebrae candle ritual will be part of our service. Tenebrae means darkness, gloom, and the shadow of death. That is where we will end tonight, in holy gloom.

Remember that Jesus and all his disciples were faithful Jews and had no desire to be anything else. So we begin as Jesus and his disciples began their seder that night during the Passover festival with scripture and prayer, then share the bread and cup and sing a hymn, as they did. Then we will go into the light of flames, and then into darkness, as Jesus and the disciples did in the Garden of Gethsemane. During the ritual of Tenebrae we will light candles representing the twelve disciples and Jesus. We will have a dramatic reading of a series of poems based on the traditional Maundy Thursday scripture passages and snuff the candles one by one, representing the disciples deserting Jesus. Finally we will extinguish the Christ candle and end in darkness. The last symbolic act this evening is lingering in darkness and silence, in reflection and prayer. Let us open our hearts and enter fully into the experience of Jesus and his disciples...

Prayer of Preparation

The ritual of the Last Supper has been handed down to us in unbroken line from Jesus himself. It reminds us that new life is always possible. It offers the hope that we might empty ourselves of all that separates us from God and one another and our true self, that we might let our old self go and be filled anew with the Holy Spirit. That same Spirit lives in all God's creation, making us one, bringing us into true communion. A traditional Maundy Thursday reading expresses this beautifully. It is from the 51st Psalm. I invite you to make this your prayer or your intention for the time this evening.

 Create in me a clean heart, O God,
 And put in me a new and right spirit.
 Do not cast me away from your presence,
 And do not take your holy spirit from me.
 Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
 And sustain in me a willing spirit...Amen

The Last Supper

As we reenact the Last Supper let us recall the setting. It was a secret safe-house. It had to be because Jesus and his followers knew that the authorities were looking for an out-of-the-way opportunity to stop them.

Time and again that week Jesus had engaged in tense confrontations with the temple priests, while the ever-present Roman soldiers watched. Now Jesus and his disciples were in an upstairs room off the street, lit by oil lamps, with shadows deepening outside their small circle of light.

It was the Passover Seder according to three of the gospel accounts, so they would have been retelling the story of the first Passover—how God told Moses that all the people should slaughter a lamb and put its blood on their doorposts as a sign. That very night God was going to go through the land of Egypt killing all the first-born so that Pharaoh would finally let the people of Israel go, but God would pass over the houses marked by the blood of the lamb. God told them to eat hurriedly and pack only unleavened dough, silver and gold and clothes for the journey across the wilderness to the promised land. God would deliver them, and forever after they were to remember and celebrate the Passover as a festival.

Now it was over a thousand years since Moses had led the people out of Egypt that first Passover, and Jesus and the disciples were keeping the Jewish tradition, retelling the story and eating the ritual meal. As was customary, the leader blessed God for the bread and wine. All the friends who were gathered there expected the familiar words that began every blessing, “Barukh atta Adonai, elehenu melech ha’olam...” Blessed are you Holy God, ruler of the universe... How many Sabbaths, how many festive meals like this one had they listened to Jesus’ loving voice as he spoke those blessings?

But this night was different from all other nights, and it added to their growing feeling of mystery and unease when Jesus said, picking up the bread, “This is my body which is broken for you.” The friends looked at one another and wondered what he meant.

You and I come here on this somber night knowing what they did not know. We know Jesus will be betrayed and deserted. We know tomorrow he will be crucified. We know all that will happen, but it is all still full of mystery. We still ask in our hearts, “What does it mean?”

And that is as it should be, because that questioning opens us for the Spirit's power within the ritual to do its hidden work. We invite you now to open your hearts to the mystery, and accept the gifts that Jesus offered to his disciples.

For this part of the drama, we are all the actors. We are the circle of Christ's beloved disciples gathered with him at that poignant table where one sat who would betray him. To be in character we need to try to feel the tension, but even more feel the presence of the man Jesus with us as real and loving as his disciples felt it at the Last Supper. In this drama we are not Christians, we are Jewish followers of a Jewish teacher at a Passover table.

I invite you to pause now and have a bite of bread and sip of something if you want to experience this with all your senses. If so, practice mindfulness as you do it, being as fully present as possible to every sensation, knowing that Jesus and the disciples experienced the same that night. If it feels awkward or lonely, you can imagine that they felt that way strangely, too....

Hymn

Jesus and the disciples sang a hymn at the end of the seder before going out to the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives. Imagine how Jesus felt, knowing what was coming. *Faith* tells us that we are never alone, that God is always with us. Our *presence* together as a congregation also tells us that we are not alone. We are surrounded by a loving community that pledges to walk with us wherever our paths may lead. But *experience* tells us that there are journeys we each must make and trials we each must face that no one can do for us. We must do them by ourselves. We can feel lonely at such times even when we know that we are not alone. That seems to be how Jesus was feeling that night. I invite you to listen now to the video of Becky Bailey's beautiful rendition of Jesus Walked this Lonesome Valley...

Part Two: Tenebrae

The Maundy Thursday Tenebrae service often includes fourteen readings from scripture done at a long table like a tableau of da Vinci's painting of the Last Supper. The initial reading in the set of fourteen is from Exodus, describing that first Passover when God delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt and the journey began through the wilderness to the Promised Land. The other

thirteen readings take place a thousand years later at Passover. They lead us through Jesus' last supper to his crucifixion.

The table is set with thirteen lit candles representing the twelve disciples and Jesus. The candles are the only light in the sanctuary. Each reader blows out a candle after reading and leaves the table until the last reader is alone, representing Christ. After that reading, the reader snuffs the last candle and the congregation enters darkness until the Christ candle is relit.

The following readings are interpretations and elaborations inspired by the scripture passages traditionally read. They are designed to give the story more context, a more continuous flow and a form more fitting the Tenebrae's dramatic presentation of the Passion. They are written as a crown of English sonnets. The last line of each becomes the first line of the next, and the last line of the entire sequence returns to the very beginning. It makes a circle of the fourteen readings, interwoven like a crown of thorns.

[See the Maundy Thursday Poems document for the sonnets.]