



SERMONS THAT WORK

Maundy Thursday

Departures

[RCL] Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14; Psalm 116:1, 10-17; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35

It is not as common an experience in North America, but perhaps you have had, at some point or place in your life, the distinctive experience of standing on the platform of a train station, either as the one who is departing or the one bidding farewell. If not, you've at least seen it in the movies—that oddly potent mixture of wistfulness and anticipation, the quick embrace, the nervous hustle, and the quick step up and away, gently rumbling off toward the horizon. And then the fluttering handkerchief, the tears, and the rush of wind across the empty tracks. It's an image that is stuck in our collective imagination, even if we are more accustomed to other, more impersonal and less evocative modes of transport.

And it's an instructive image, though perhaps an unconventional one, to hold in our minds today on Maundy Thursday, as we embark on our own three-day journey across the valleys and peaks of the Paschal Mystery. We will see and experience much together on these liturgical tracks: dazzling vistas of memory and promise; the quiet intimacy of a shared meal; and at times the inky blackness of night, with our reflection in the glass as our only companion. Eventually, we will arrive at an entirely new and unimaginable destination, where One waits to greet us in the dusky, verdant dawn of a Sunday morning. But right now, on Maundy Thursday, we are in the midst of our departure and we should attend to what departures can teach us.

First, *travel light*. That is the message that God has for the Israelites on the cusp of their own departure into their destiny. Eat quickly, reverently, and then travel light, leaving behind all those things that cannot endure the journey—your boxes of despair, your chests of regret, your shackles of servitude. Leave them behind in a pile, with the blood of the lamb marking the spot of their abandonment, as you abandon yourselves to the new thing that God desires for you—liberation, courage, undaunted joy. Wrap yourselves in a mantle of trust and wave goodbye to your subjugation, for the Way of the Lord is broad and cuts straight across the wilderness for those willing to step up and be carried away.

And you will discover, as you go, that traveling light is one thing that always sets the people of God apart from the likes of Pharaoh and his counterparts, those tyrants who traffic in heavy, swordlike certainties. Unlike them, the people of God always have a bit of the railroad vagabond about them—the dusty feet and the deep hunger and the eyes widened by wonder and the heart softened by humility. The Passover

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departure teaches us that our liberation and our salvation will always bear the imprint of that dusty, hungry, vibrant spirit of our forebears. To escape the old heartbreak, to reach the land beyond the Red Sea, to become the light of the world, *travel light*.

Departure's second teaching is this: *Say goodbye*. Jesus' supper with his disciples, among all the other things it is, is a goodbye meal. Our Lord knows, tonight, that the train will soon pull out of the station, toward a place where, for now, only he can go. But before he goes, a proper farewell is required—the kind that leaves nothing unsaid, nothing withheld.

God knows we can go through our lives lulled by the assumption of tomorrow. Surely there will always be time to say what needs saying to the ones we love. But occasionally, piercingly, we discover that this is not so, that people are called away on the night train, and we are left on the empty platform with a thousand unimparted sentiments weighing our hearts down like a millstone.

Jesus says, “*No, there will be no withheld words among us, my friends.*” We will speak our love, we will speak our fears, we will speak our souls to one another across this table in the dimming light. We will confess our care, cleansing and holding onto one another while we still can do these things. Because yes, departure is imminent, but now, here, in the eternal, Eucharistic, precious present, we have a new commandment: To be and say everything that we are, to feast upon each other's fullness. And this goodbye will be enough to sustain you through the darkness of the days to come, across the hungry years and the lonely places. This meal, this moment, this perfect goodbye, will be enough until we see each other again. So, *say goodbye*.

Finally, tonight, departure teaches us that *God is among the travelers*. God is, and always has been, the One found in transit and transition. From the wilderness journey of Israel to the long and winding road of Jesus and his followers, God is most reliably present in liminal places and in liminal people. And this is good wisdom to take with us on the way, we who are disciples in an age of crumbling certainties.

If we wish to know where to look for God in such a time as this, we should not be beguiled by the promises of monumentality and unyielding strength. Those are and always have been the wrong places to look, the wrong places to seek hope, even if they seem to last for a little while.

No, for those with ears to hear, God's call has always been more like a train whistle than a war trumpet, and if we would truly follow, then we should look for God among the people who know about departures—the ones who know all too well about stepping up onto the train as it leaves the station. And who are they? They are the migrant, and the unhoused, and the lost and the hungry. They are the ones who have transitioned and the ones who have come out. They are the ones who know: There are worse things than leaving home because sometimes venturing out is the only thing that can save us.

As with the Israelites and with Jesus, too, we learn from these saints of departure how to leave behind the affection we have known for the sake of a greater love. We learn how to lay down our baggage, how to lay down our lives, so that we might live in a different way, whole and holy, and free.

It is something that Pharaoh does not understand; something that God alone can reveal to us. It is something unfamiliar and alive, this departure that beckons toward the horizon, that calls us toward that thing waiting for us on the other side of night.

And with all this in mind, it's important to notice that on this Maundy Thursday, our liturgy does not actually end when we leave. It keeps going. We keep moving in perpetual transit through these three days. Tonight, we have simply embarked, because the God of departures, at work in our hearts, has told us, again, that it is time to go.

So, like those who have gone before us, like all those who have had the courage to depart, gather up what is precious to you. Eat quickly, but reverently. Lay down that which has burdened you thus far. Speak words of love and truth and gratitude to one another. And then step up and come away.

It is a perilous and powerful journey, the one we are about to make together. But, as has always been the case, it is the journey that will save us. It is the journey that, since the very beginning, God has been hoping we will make.

All aboard.

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