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 St. John in the Wilderness, Flat Rock, NC  
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### Maundy Thursday

In his Holy Week message for this year, our bishop, Jose McLoughlin, described two processions. The first procession is the Palm Sunday one with which you are familiar: Jesus riding in from the east towards the Holy City as the Passover nears. He sits humbly on a donkey and approaches Jerusalem as fellow pilgrims and local peasants take notice of his coming. His reputation as a miracle worker, as one who feeds the hungry and heals the sick, proceeds him. They meet him along the way to wave palms, hail him as King, and create a parade's pathway while saying, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

But there is another procession happening at the same time on the other side of the city. Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor of Judea, is arriving in Jerusalem also. Foot soldiers march in formation around him. Mounted infantry and officers on horseback shake the ground as they approach on roads built by Rome. In the middle of this display of military might, on the largest steed of all, we see Pontius Pilate, wearing traveling armor, riding confidently and comfortably with his troops surrounding him. He comes to Jerusalem as a government official, a military leader, responsible for keeping law and order during a festival that increases the city's population by six-fold. Rather than the poor coming out to meet him, grandmothers tell their grandchildren to go inside and shut the door as the dust cloud and foot-thunder nears.

Two processions on the move. Two kingdoms on display. Jesus comes as one who proclaims and embodies the Kingdom of God. Pilate comes as one who proclaims and embodies the Empire of Rome. The humility of the procession by the Son of God must not escape us now because this is the beginning of the culmination of his mission. Jesus is on his donkey surrounded by the poor who are looking to him for a way out of Empire's occupation -- of a life occupied by scarcity, hopelessness, predetermined destinies, hunger, violence -- a life occupied by Empire. Jesus has come to unmask the powers and principalities of this world that feed on our bodies and our souls.

When I talk about "Empire," or about principalities and powers, I am talking about the real forces of this world which lie to us to take away our basic human dignity and to keep us divided one from another -- forces which never stop saying things like:

- If you don't look out for yourself, no one else will. Take what you can get. You don't owe anyone anything.
- Kill or be killed. This is about survival.
- Nothing is ever going to change. That's the way it always has been and always will be.

- Those people are different from us. There's no point of even trying.
- You're only worth what you look like and you don't look good.
- You probably deserved what that person did or said to you. It's your own damn fault.
- You were actually thinking that you deserved to be loved? Don't kid yourself.

You will have your own list of half-truths and manipulations that play over and over again in your head. The list goes on and on with hopelessness, resentment, boatloads of shame, anger, and hatred of ourselves and others. Where do these ideas come from? These are lies that humans have repeated since the beginning of time. Perhaps there is no greater lie that we have sold to one another than regarding what true power and authority looks like. It looks like money. It looks like might. It looks like influence. It looks like security. It wields fear, violence, and control.

Jesus the Christ is the King of the Universe. He was there when the world was created. He is God incarnate. He is power. He is authority. He can control. But instead, on this mission of unmasking and defeating the powers and principalities of this world, Jesus gathers with Twelve friends on the night before he lays down his life for the world. While at supper with them, he gets up, ties a towel around his waist and, assuming the position of a servant, he begins to wash the feet of his disciples. One of them said, "Lord, you will never wash my feet." And Jesus responds, "Unless I wash your feet, you have no share with me."

Here we find the King of Kings and Lord of Lords showing us what power and strength are going to look like in the Kingdom of God. Rulership, authority, strength and might in God's Kingdom are fully realized by becoming a servant, especially to those whom the world tells us are beneath our station. Jesus first demonstrates the scandal of service by washing his disciples' feet and then he tells them to wash one another's feet also. Having served them himself, he can tell them to serve one another. It's an unmasking of Empire. It's subverting structures of power. It's making foolish the lies of this world which prey on young and old alike.

Just remember this: the evil powers and principalities of this world don't just exist around you. They also exist within you. The foot washing we do tonight unmask us also and allows us to share in the victory that Christ has given us by becoming the Suffering Servant that he is. This is why it's so important that you share in this in whatever way that you can. Like you, I don't enjoy touching other people's feet, much less washing them. It's as unnatural to me as it is to you. It makes me uncomfortable, but something happens when we hear Jesus' new commandment to love one another this night and we enact it ritually as a church family. Through stepping into our discomfort, through the vulnerability of it all, we experience this unmasking of Empire, this making folly of the powers of this world, for ourselves. It allows us to experience the true power of God that Jesus is all about.

We have thought of every detail. All of the logistics that you're wondering about have been taken care of. If you can't kneel down to wash someone else's feet then come forward still and find a seat here. Yes, it's vulnerable. Yes, it's uncomfortable. Now take off your shoes and come forward curious about the Kingdom. Let another serve you and then kneel down and become Christ to your neighbor. In just this foot washing ceremony, Empires begin to crumble and true power takes hold in our hearts and in this place.