Maundy Thursday is when the bottom falls out. It is when this wild ride that Jesus and his friends have been on for the last 3 or so years finally comes grinding to a halt, when familiar faces scatter and all is left in darkness.

Have you ever had the bottom fall out? Maybe it was when a loved one died, and the world didn’t seem like the same place it had been just a few days earlier. Or perhaps it was when you learned something or came to some realization that shook your faith—your faith in God, your faith in humanity, your faith in yourself—to its core. You were left not knowing which way was up, not knowing what to do next or even how to pick yourself up and dust yourself off. Maybe it was a betrayal; maybe a friend, a sibling, a parent, even a spouse showed you a side of them you had never known and could never again unknow.

If you’ve ever had the bottom fall out, you know that something always dies. A belief, an idea, a hope, a relationship, maybe a piece of yourself. Something dies and everything is forever changed. There is no going back to “normal,” there is only enduring until a new normal begins to settle out of the chaos. But in order to endure, there must be some hope that eventually, the dust will settle.

This year during Lent, we’ve been exploring covenant by hearing the stories of Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jeremiah. Each of these characters experienced salvation in new ways: rescue from the flood, a new home and a new family, freedom from slavery and a promised home, the law of God written on hearts like stone tablets.

Like them, every generation of Israelites experienced a new salvation: settling, the judges, monarchy, prophetic reform, exile, return. The story of scripture doesn’t point to a singular salvation, it shows us the continual pattern of salvation which promises the continuation of the pattern into our present and beyond, into the future. Each of these stories of salvation is a part of the same story we call covenant: God’s continual work to settle the dust and cobble together something new that becomes not only normal, but better. This is the covenant; Jesus is this covenant.

 When Jesus sits down to dinner with his friends for the last time, he picks up the cup and says, “This cup is my blood of the new covenant.” Perhaps we can understand that to mean not a new covenant that supercedes the old, but the next experience of the same old covenant, the new way of hearing the old story. For his first disciples that meant a new lease on old traditions, and eventually a departure from their Jewish heritage that they had always known. In speaking those simple words, he was announcing the bottom falling out from under them, and a new life that awaited them when the dust settled. What if those words mean the same for us?

Perhaps Jesus is not a savior sent to perform a singular act for us, either of dying or of rising. Perhaps he did not come as the Son of God to overshadow us with his immense glory and power, or as a model for us to follow in order to lead a godly life, or as a great physician to heal all our hurts and cure all our ills, whether spiritual or physical. He is all these things, but these are not all that he is. In his prologue, St. John tells us who Jesus is and what he has come to do: “No one has ever seen God,” the evangelist tells us; “It is God’s only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who makes God known.” Perhaps he makes God known by dropping the bottom out on us, by upending everything else we’ve ever known until there is nothing to know, waiting only for the dust to settle.

We read these words and we take them to be a doctrine, a set of beliefs. We have instituted a ritual supper around this dinner scene, written pages and spilled both ink and blood defending our particular notions about what this meal means. But what if Jesus didn’t come to institute a religion, not even the “right” religion? What if instead, he came to invite us into his own heart, just as he is in the Father’s heart? We heard St. Paul’s words on Sunday: “Have the same mind in you that was in Christ Jesus…”

Well, this is the mind of Christ: when his hour had come, John writes, Jesus, knowing that he had come from God and was going to God, that God had started the engine and handed him the keys, showed his love in this way: he stripped down to his shirtsleeves and washed his disciples’ feet. This only happens two other times in the bible.

One was when Abigail washed David’s feet as she begged for her life and her husband’s life. Washing David’s feet was her way of saying that he could take or do whatever he wanted so long as he let them live. It was an act of desperation and complete submission. The other time this happened was when Mary of Bethany anointed Jesus’ feet with her expensive perfume and wiped them dry with her hair: a show of complete and abject gratitude for raising her brother Lazarus back to life. In both cases, the women performing the task were debasing themselves to make the point of how utterly powerless they were.

And here is the Son of the Most High God doing the same. You can understand why Peter objects. This is a complete reversal of the way things are done. Footwashing is far to intimate an act, it’s far too scandalous. Not even a slave could be commanded to wash someone’s feet; it was just too degrading. But now it gets worse. Jesus says, “I’m your master and teacher, and I’ve done this for you. No servant is greater than the master, right? So if I have done this, you should do this, too.” And the bottom falls out. But did you catch why? So that we may give love as great as the love we have been given.

Sometimes we get hung up on that word, “commandment.” It sounds like an order given to a soldier, or a slave. If we follow, we are being obedient, good; but if we don’t, we are; wrong, disobedient, bad. We like commandments because all we have to do is follow, obey, imitate, do. But Jesus’ whole point is that we can’t know God just by following commandments: not his, or anyone else’s. This is why our bottom falls out: there is no way we can know God. This is the death of faith.

Of course, we have to remember what story we’re in. In this story, we know, death is the way to new life; the bottom falling out is the door to something new opening. As we aim for obedience, or piety, or holiness—as we fail, or maybe even attain these goals—we find them empty, wanting. There is nothing there except our own empty pride, our own crushed expectations. A piece of us, of our faith, shrivels up and dies, and the bottom falls out. And that, Jesus says, is exactly where we want to be. In each of these deaths there is the opportunity to trust in Jesus—not his teaching, not his death, not his commandments, but in him, the man himself, the one who washes our feet and lays down his life.

In the next scene, Jesus tells his disciples that he is himself The Way. To follow that Way—the Way of perfect love—is to be reborn, to experience salvation anew in each new death, to continue along the journey of faith closer and closer to the Father, falling deeper and deeper into the heart and the mind of Christ, who is himself falling ever deeper into the heart and the mind of God. This is what it means to abide.

Notice what Jesus tells his friends: “If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.” There is no consequence for failure, no eternal punishment for those who cannot bring themselves to wash a foot, to love someone or something else “to the end,” but there is also no opportunity to experience life in a new way.

In the moment of this meal, we begin to see that this story is about far more than just about saving the Church or the world or the Universe. It’s not just about life after death. These are all good things to hope for, but they are incidental to the equation, mere side effects to the fundamental goal. Ultimately, this is all about letting go of the idea that you and I and Jesus and the Father are separate entities. It’s about seeing that my story gives way to our story gives way to The Story, the Big Picture that God is creating for everything.

We begin to see that we are one with Christ and that, in Christ, we are one with each other and with God. This is why Christ loves them to the end: because his love for them—for us—*is* his love for God. God is One; in God, all are One. Loving with our whole being causes us to fall deeper and deeper into that interconnectedness, to see ourselves as a part of this greater reality. That is abundant life: life without beginning or end which is, by definition, eternal. There is no destination, only a journey ever deeper from depth into depth as we find our place in the Oneness of God.

And so, when the bottom falls out tonight, when Jesus is arrested and tried and unjustly executed, when his disciples are scattered and frightened, this is not a hitch in God’s plans but a path to follow, through pain and confusion, to know Christ deeper and better and to abide in him as he abides in us.

The bottom falls out and we find ourselves plummeting through doubt and despair and questioning; and if we’re willing to keep falling, to keep following the Way, we may just find ourselves in another salvation, a deeper salvation, until the bottom falls out again and we once again fall deeper into God.