

Epworth Chapel on the Green
April 17, 2014
Maundy Thursday
Rev. Brook Thelander

Exodus 12:1-14
Psalm 78:14-20, 23-25
I Corinthians 11:23-26
Luke 22:14-30

I have spoken often with you about the fact that Christianity is not merely a set of ideas to be believed or propositions to be argued; it is about living and dying and rising again with Jesus Christ.

One of the foundational principles of the liturgy is what worship scholar Robert Webber called “commemorative time.” By that he meant that through our participation in the sacred actions and rituals of worship, the meaning and significance of *past* events is brought forward into the *present*.

This is what’s happening in our Old Testament lesson, where Moses instructs the people to take lambs without defect and to slaughter them and to place the blood on the door frames of their homes, and then to eat a meal made from the lambs, along with the bread and bitter herbs.

The death angel then passed through and struck down every first born male that was Egyptian, but when he saw the blood on the doors of the houses of the children of Israel, he “passed over” and they were spared.

This event, the Passover, became the central event in all the Old Testament. It marked God's deliverance of the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt, and began their identity as God's chosen people.

The reason Moses commands the people to perpetuate this event by celebrating Passover through ritual meal and action is not because he is sentimental and wants the people to remember the "good ol' days."

The reason he commands the people to do this is because he knows that it is important for people who come along generations later to be able to take part in what God has done, to experience the meaning of this past event for themselves even though they are many years removed from it.

And so, through the ritual words and actions of the Passover meal, the people who came along later did just that. They experienced anew their deliverance from Egypt and their identity as God's people.

Many years later, Jesus sat at a table with his disciples, ready to celebrate the Passover meal. Here he shows the disciples that he himself is the true Passover Lamb, whose body and blood is about to be offered up so that God's people might be delivered from their slavery -- a slavery not to Egypt, but to sin and its deadly consequences.

Through his suffering and death and resurrection, Jesus showed himself as God's true Paschal Lamb, the Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world.

Through him, we are delivered from slavery to sin and the old life, and born again to a living hope of resurrection and eternal life.

But some may ask, “how does this happen, when we are so many years removed from Jesus’ suffering and death?”

It happens for us much as it did for the children of Israel, as we participate in the sacred actions and rituals that Jesus commanded on this night so many years ago.

Paul echoes this in our epistle: “whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (I Cor. 11:26).

When we gather and celebrate the Lord’s Supper, we are not merely “announcing” to ourselves and to the world that Christ died and rose again, as though we had short memories and constantly need to be reminded of this.

When we come to the table and enact these sacred actions and say these sacred words, the meaning and power and reality of Jesus’ death is brought forward into the present moment. Christ’s saving work is present and active in our midst *NOW*.

Today begins what St. Augustine called the “Great Triduum,” or great three days, focusing on the climactic period of Jesus’ earthly life.

“Maundy Thursday” gets its name from the latin *mandatum novarum* (“a new commandment”), which was later translated into the French *mande*. It is

taken from Jesus' words to the disciples in the upper room when he said to them: "a new commandment I give to you, that you love one another as I have loved you."

Maundy Thursday is also known as the birthday of the Eucharist, because it remembers Jesus' institution of the very first Eucharist at the Last Supper. It is an important occasion because on every other occasion during the year when the Lord's Supper is observed, we are giving thanks *through* the Eucharist for God's saving actions. But on this day, we celebrate the Lord's Supper by giving thanks for the Eucharist itself.

Max Lucado tells a wonderful story about an experience he had as a young boy, an experience which helps him to ponder the wonder and mystery of the Lord's Supper:

When I was a young boy I was part of a church corps which took communion to the shut-ins and hospitalized. We visited those who were unable to come to church but still desired to pray and partake of communion. I must have been ten or eleven years of age when we went to one hospital room that housed an elderly gentleman who was very weak. He was asleep, so we tried to wake him. We couldn't. We shook him, tapped him on the shoulder, we spoke to him, but we couldn't stir him.

We hated to leave without performing our duty, but we didn't know what to do. One of the young boys with me observed that even though the man was asleep his mouth was open. Why not? We said. So we prayed over the cracker and stuck a piece on his tongue. Then we prayed over the grape juice and poured it down his mouth.

He never woke up.

Neither do many today. For some, communion is a sleepy hour in which wafers are eaten and juice is drunk and the soul never stirs. It wasn't intended to be as such.

It was intended to be an I-can't-believe-it's-me-pinch-me-I'm-dreaming invitation to sit at God's table and be served by the King himself.

When you read the accounts of the Last Supper, one incredible truth surfaces. Jesus is the person behind it all. It was Jesus who selected the place, designated the time, and set the meal in order.

And at the supper, Jesus is not a guest, but the host...Jesus is not the served, but the servant...Jesus is the most active one at the table. Jesus is not the one who reclines and receives, but the one who stands and gives.

He still does. The Lord's Supper is a gift to you. The Lord's Supper is a sacrament, not a sacrifice.

Often, we think of the Supper as a performance, a time when we are on stage and God is the audience. A ceremony in which we do the work and he does the watching. That's not how it was intended. If it was, Jesus would have taken his seat at the table and relaxed.

That's not what he did...He fulfilled his role as a servant by washing his disciples' feet. He fulfilled his role as a Savior by granting them forgiveness of sins.

He was in charge. He was on center stage. He was the person behind and in the moment.

And he still is.

It is the Lord's table you sit at. It is the Lord's Supper you eat. Just as Jesus prayed for his disciples, Jesus begs God for us. When you are called to the table, it might be an emissary who gives the letter, but it is Jesus who wrote it.

It is a holy invitation. A sacred sacrament bidding you to leave the chores of life and enter his splendor.

He meets you at the table. And when the bread is broken, Christ breaks it. When the wine is poured, Christ pours it. And when your burdens are lifted, it is because the King in the apron has drawn near.

So the next time the messenger calls you to the table, drop what you are doing and go. Be blessed and be fed. Most importantly, be sure you are still eating at his table when he calls us home.

[From *The Final Week of Jesus*, pp. 88-90]

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.