

Epworth Chapel on the Green
March 25, 2016
Good Friday
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 52:13-53:12
Psalm 22:1-11
Hebrews 10:1-25
John 19:1-37

John, in his eyewitness account of Jesus' passion, reminds us of Jesus' statement in verse 30 where he says: "It is finished."

At the risk of sounding foolish, the question should be asked: *What does the "it" refer to?* What is being finished or completed?

Our typical answer might be to say that it is Jesus' sacrifice for the world's sin that is being finished. Which would be true, as far as it goes. But is there something more to the story?

I believe there is.

Last night, in Luke's Gospel we heard the account of the Last Supper where Jesus celebrated the Old Testament Passover with his disciples.

The Old Testament Passover Seder consisted of four courses, with 4 corresponding cups of wine that concluded each course.

The first course included a blessing prayer (the *Kiddush*), and the eating of bitter herbs. Then the first cup of wine was consumed.

The second course began by reciting Exodus 12 (usually by question and answer format). Then Psalm 113 was sung. It was known as the “Little Hallel.” The second cup of wine was then consumed.

The third course was the main course, where the roasted lamb and unleavened bread was eaten. Then the third cup of wine, known as the “cup of blessing,” was consumed.

The fourth course was the climax to the meal. Psalms 114-118, known as the *Great Hallel* would be sung. Then the fourth cup of wine would be passed, consummating the meal.

What we saw last night from Luke’s Gospel and the account of the Passover meal is ordinary, run-of-the-mill stuff to us. But to Jewish scholars and those thoroughly acquainted with the Old Testament Passover, something is amiss.

In the upper room, the cup that Jesus blesses and passes is the *third* cup, the cup of blessing. It is the same cup the Apostle Paul speaks of to the Corinthians when he says, “the cup that we bless, is it not a communion of the blood of Christ?” We have additional evidence that it is the third cup that Jesus passes, because following this we are told that they sing the hymn and then they depart for the Mount of Olives. Scholars are almost unanimously in agreement that the hymn they sing here is the “Little Hallel,” which is part of the third course of the Passover.

And this is where the sequence goes haywire. For Jesus and his disciples leave the upper room without consuming the fourth cup of wine and consummating the Passover celebration. The sequence is disrupted.

Why did Jesus NOT drink the fourth cup of wine? Why did he leave the Passover meal unfinished?

Hold that thought, and follow Jesus now to the Garden of Gethsemane. Remember what happens? He falls to his knees three times and prays, “Father, if possible, let this *cup* pass from me.”

What cup is he talking about here? This has always puzzled me.

Then I remembered what occurred before in the upper room, which we read last night. Jesus says there to his disciples: “I have earnestly desired to celebrate this Passover with you; for I tell you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine again until the kingdom comes.”

So, Jesus departs the upper room with his disciples without finishing the fourth stage of the Passover and without drinking the fourth cup. He then goes to the Garden and prays that this “cup” might be taken from him.

Come now with me to Jesus as he hangs on the Cross. John tells us that as a direct fulfillment of Scripture, Jesus says, “I thirst” (v.28)

Remember, now, that Jesus has been hanging on the Cross for hours. Crucifixion was a brutal form of slow death. It didn’t kill you through loss of

blood. It killed a person because you suffocated. Your muscles give out, causing your lungs to give out and to fill with fluid.

After hanging on a Cross for any length of time, a person could no longer *breathe* without extreme pain, let alone *speak*.

But John says that as a deliberate fulfillment of Scripture, Jesus says, “I am thirsty.” So a hyssop branch with a sponge is dipped in some wine, and it is held up to Jesus’ lips.

Interestingly, Matthew and Mark and Luke do not tell us if Jesus accepts the wine. But John does. The hyssop branch is held up to Jesus’ lips, and he takes the wine.

Note this: The hyssop branch used here to hold the wine to Jesus’ lips is the same word that is used in Exodus 12, where the children of Israel are instructed to smear the blood of the Passover lamb on their doorposts. The instrument used to smear the blood on the doorposts is the same thing used here to hold wine to Jesus’ lips as he hangs on the Cross.

So let’s return to our original question. When Jesus says, “It is finished,” what is he talking about? What exactly is finished?

When Jesus takes the wine and says, “It is finished,” he is not just referring to what has occurred on the Cross. *He is referring to the Passover meal that began the night before in the upper room.* Jesus deliberately interrupted the Old covenant

Passover to bring the new covenant Passover to completion. When Jesus accepts the wine on the Cross, *it is tantamount to drinking the fourth cup of wine that consummated the Passover.*

Jesus' sacrifice for sin, then, begins NOT when he is nailed to the Cross, *but when he celebrates the Passover in the upper room.* It begins with the separation of his body and blood in the Eucharist. For when you separate the body from the blood, you have death.

And the Passover sacrifice did not end when Jesus and his disciples left the upper room. It ends when Jesus receives the wine from the Cross, and he says: "It is finished."

And so John has portrayed in great detail what he tells us very early on in his Gospel where he says of Jesus: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

If there is any lingering doubt that Jesus is the Paschal Lamb, two details from John's account here will put those doubts to rest.

In verse 23, where John tells us that the soldiers divide Jesus' clothing, he mentions that his robe was *seamless*. The word here for this seamless robe is the word *kiton*. It is the same word used in Exodus and Leviticus to describe what the High Priest wore when he offered sacrifices. John is showing us here that Jesus is

both the *victim and the priest*, the Lamb sacrificed and the Priest offering the sacrifice.

Then in verse 33 John tells us that the guards break the legs of the men crucified with Jesus, but they do not break Jesus' legs. This happens, John tells us, to fulfill the Scriptures from Psalm 34 and Exodus 12.

If you go back to Exodus 12, you will read there the requirements for the lamb that was to be slain for the Passover. The lamb was to be unblemished. And it was to have *no broken bones*.

And so with John, and with all the saints, and with all those who have gone before us, and looking forward to all who will come after us, we proclaim tonight: *Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.*

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