

Maundy Thursday: Luke 22:14-30
Church of the Good Shepherd
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Tasting Salvation

On October 7, 2023, last year, the world was shocked by the news that Hamas, the Islamist group in control of the Gaza Strip, had launched a murderous campaign into southern Israel that ended with hundreds of casualties, including men, women, and children, all civilians who were brutalized. Shock was the first response, even before horror, at the event. But as unprepared as the Israeli government was for the assault, the Jewish people are no strangers to threats against their existence. Several nations and empires have sought their extinction throughout Israel's history. You might even say it is part of their DNA, their identity as a people. A rabbi I know suggests that the fact that the Jewish people still exist, despite all the attempts on their destruction, just proves that they are in fact God's chosen people!

But what impresses me more than Jewish resilience is how they have responded to the repeated attempts at their extinction. As our Jewish tour guide in Israel told us when I visited the Holy Land five years ago, the history of the Jewish people can be summed up by these three statements: "They tried to kill us, God saved us, Let's eat." Fact is, if you dig into them, all of the Jewish holidays are based on those principles—Channukah, Purim, Sukkoth (festival of booths) all holidays commemorating a threat to Israel that ended in a feast.. But the first and most important instance of this near-destruction-turned-into-feasting is of course Passover.

Several thousand years ago, the ancestors of today's Jews were living in Egypt. They were effectively slaves, living under the boot—or rather the sandal—of the tyrant Pharaoh. The Israelites cried out to the God of their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and God sent Moses who demanded that Pharaoh let His people go so that they could worship their God in the desert. Moses made this appeal several times and each time Pharaoh's heart remained hardened. Even after God sent plagues of dead fish, frogs, locusts, biting flies, and boils, Pharaoh still refused to release them. After nine plagues, God had one more plague to drop, the deaths of the firstborn. But before He did that, God had Moses tell his people to get ready. They would soon be leaving for a long journey, and they needed to prepare for it by eating a hearty meal.

God laid out the menu: roasted lamb, unleavened bread, and bitter herbs. Each family was to have their own lamb and they were to eat it dressed for travel, walking stick in hand. But it wasn't just the nourishment, the "fuel," that the meal would give them; each ingredient had a special meaning. The lamb is the sacrifice that secured their freedom, its blood painted on their doorposts to tell the angel of death to pass by. The bread was unleavened, because there was no time to let it rise, to leaven, because their deliverance was imminent. And the bitter herbs dipped in salt water symbolized the bitterness of the treatment they had received under Egyptian rule and the tears they cried in their suffering. Sacrifice, anticipation, bitterness—these were what they were to dine on, to take them into themselves, the ingredients becoming part of who they are, becoming nourishment for their journey towards the Promised Land.

Pretty profound symbolism. But, symbolism aside, we may yet wonder, Why a *meal*? Because the meal made their deliverance concrete, made it real, made it present before them to see and touch and taste. This was essential for their understanding and embracing of salvation, a fact that is underlined by God's command that they eat this meal together forever, "throughout your generations"—year after year after year on the fourteenth day of the spring month Nisan. It's clear, the Passover meal wasn't intended to be a one-time thing, thereafter an interesting relic of Jewish history. It was to be an annual event, a meal prepared and eaten by each Jewish family down the ages, just as their ancestors had. By this Jews maintained the memory of their salvation by God's hand. Not just telling the story but eating it, taking in the sacrifice, the anticipation, and the bitterness themselves, making their ancestors' experience of deliverance their own.

The meal, eating, food is what connects the people of Israel not only to the Passover but to the whole history of salvation, indeed the very need for salvation itself. The Fall, you'll recall, happened as a result of eating, eating the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Our primordial ancestors ate the fruit apart from God, against God's wishes, against his commandment. In eating it, they didn't just disobey God, they rejected the understanding of food as a means of our relating to God, a way of sustaining communion with Him. Having broken faith with God, they could no longer break bread with him, and so our ancestors were kicked out, excused from God's table.

The whole history of salvation can then be understood as an effort to get us back to God's table, to restore an awareness that we live by God's hand, that we have life because of God, that we are saved from utter destruction by God's grace. Each time God's people were threatened with extermination—enslaved by Pharaoh in Egypt, wandering forty years in the desert, oppressed by pagan Greek conquerors (1 and 2 Maccabees), imperiled by the jealousy of a court official (the book of Esther)—each time God saved them and then they held a meal to celebrate, to give thanks. And so each experience of deliverance, each near-extinction, became an occasion for God's people to be restored to God, to eat in his honor, at his table, to know experientially God's generous providence and care.

The invitation to eat at God's table takes on a new depth and new significance with Jesus at the Last Supper. On the night before he was crucified, Jesus ate supper with his disciples in the Upper Room. It was the Passover, the same meal that their ancestors ate on the cusp of their deliverance. Only Jesus changes it, redirects it, makes the meal all about him. Everything the Passover means, he says, now applies to me. The lamb that was slain for their deliverance, for salvation, that is Jesus. The wine they were drinking, that's his blood, the blood of the lamb, only now instead of marking the doorposts, it marked their souls. The bread was likewise his body, which was broken for them. And the bitter herbs—well, there's no mention of the herbs at the Last Supper, but there will be tears soon enough as Jesus, their master and teacher and friend, is crucified before them. The whole meal, we see, is a new Passover, which, like the original Passover, God's people eat, take into themselves, to make salvation part of them.

And we are invited to eat this meal too. Every time we come together as God's people, we are ushered in to sit at God's table, to share in his fellowship, in his communion, to not just eat of God's bounty but to eat of Him, to share in his goodness, to take God into ourselves. In eating this meal, we recall how God acted mightily in Jesus, how God saved us through him, and we are

re-membered to that event. That momentous event 2000 years ago is brought to the present, that we might experience it, experience that salvation ourselves.

Now, we have to be honest, what we receive at the altar each Sunday doesn't seem like much. Just a morsel of bread and sip of wine. Not anything that would break someone's diet. One way we might think of communion then is as a taste, an appetizer, something to excite our hunger and at the same time hold us over until the main course arrives.

Or we might instead think of it, as the church once did, as '*viaticum*.' Back in the time of the Roman Empire, when a magistrate traveled on state business, he would take with him their *viaticum*, the Latin term referring to the food, clothes and money he would need to get him through the trip. In the early church, they started calling the communion given to those on the verge of death 'the Viaticum,' as it was what the Christian soul needed for its journey to the sweet hereafter. Soon though it came to refer to any Eucharist, with the understanding that the Eucharist is what we need for the journey through this life. Jesus, his body and blood, is then our viaticum, our necessities for the journey ahead.

That notion has resonance on a further level. For, another tradition surrounding the Passover is that at the end of the meal it is customary that someone sings, "L'Shana Haba'ah B'Yerushalayim, literally, "Next year in Jerusalem!" With this, Jews throughout the world express a longing to return to Jerusalem and a restored Israel. Well, hope and longing are part of the meal Jesus gave us, too! Each time we celebrate communion we do so with the expectation of Jesus' return. "We remember his death, we proclaim his resurrection, *we await his coming in glory*," we say. With this we acknowledge that this little taste, this viaticum, is not the end, not the goal. It rather looks beyond this life, to the day when Christ's kingdom will be established. On that day, we won't have only a taste but will sit down with our Lord to a feast, a banquet, and we will eat and drink with him alongside all our brothers and sisters, for eternity. *That* is what heaven looks like, what salvation means: sitting down to enjoy a feast with God and God's people.

In the meantime, however, until then, we hold that vision, that promise in our hearts as we face the struggles, temptations and injustices of this life, as we bear hardships and persecution on account of our beliefs, as we face what looks like our certain destruction at the hands of our enemies--Sin, Death, and the Devil. We do so, sustained by the Eucharist, by communion. For in celebrating the Eucharist, we proclaim together Christ's victory and our salvation, and more powerfully, we are given a sign, a concrete, physical symbol of our salvation, to hold us over.

And so now, what my Jewish guide said of his people we can say of ourselves. They tried to destroy us. God saved us. Let's eat! Amen.

But before we eat, we need to wash up!

According to the Gospel of John: 'Before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. During supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all

things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, he took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.”

In remembrance and emulation of Christ's service to the disciples, you are invited to participate in the custom of footwashing...