

SERMON TEXT FOR MAUNDY THURSDAY

PREACHED MARCH 29, 2018 AT ZION LUTHERAN, ENOLA PA

TEXTS: Exodus 12.1-14; 1 Corinthians 11.23-26; John 13.1-7, 31b-35;
Psalm 116.1-2, 12-19

Just a few weeks ago we were privileged to hear a presentation from a Jewish Christian on the Passover. In his presentation, he explained the significance of the Passover meal to the Jewish people and the traditions surrounding it. For our Jewish brothers and sisters, Passover begins tomorrow night, and how appropriate it is that in our worship tonight we hear God's commands to his people that established that most important Jewish holiday.

Passover, which celebrates the Exodus of the Jewish people from their bondage in Egypt under Pharaoh, is one of the festivals that grounds Jewish life in history and tradition. This festival, which always occurs near the time of our Easter celebration, features the Passover lamb. You may recall that in punishment God planned to kill all of the firstborn children in Egypt. But to protect the Hebrew children from this destruction, the Israelites were instructed to paint their doorposts with the blood of lambs. When the angel of death would see the blood on the doorposts, that house would be passed over - hence the name of the Jewish festival.

Our first reading from Exodus includes God's instructions to Moses for the people on how to prepare their last meal before fleeing Egypt. It is not a meal to be savored but to eaten hurriedly. There was not time for bread to leaven, so unleavened bread would have to do. And the lamb roasted over the fire - *"let none of it remain until the morning"* God commands.

God concludes the explanation with this command: *"This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance."* And for thousands of years, Jews have been doing just that. //

Only hours before his arrest, Jesus gathered with his disciples in the Upper Room for the observance of the Passover - at least, according to John's gospel; others disagree about this point. Knowing that he would be arrested and put to death in a few hours, Jesus told his disciples, *"I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer, for I tell you I shall not eat it until it is fulfilled in the Kingdom of God."*

At this celebration, Jesus took this ancient ritual and made it into something new. He took elements of the Passover - the unleavened bread and the cup of wine - and identified them as His body and blood, symbolizing his death. *"Do this in remembrance of me,"* he said. *"For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the*

Lord's death until he comes." In this act, Jesus revealed himself as the promised redeemer, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Almost from the beginning, the church has described the Lord's supper using imagery from the Passover, especially in portraying Jesus as the lamb who delivers God's people from sin and death - just as the blood of the lambs used to mark the doors of the Hebrew people protected their firstborn children from death. To the Corinthians, the apostle Paul describes the significance of this meal for Christians, but there is a marked difference. Paul links this meal not to Passover but to the betrayal of Jesus by Judas. *"For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body ... this is the new covenant in my blood. Do this ... in remembrance of me.'" And then this important statement: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."*

This eating and drinking is not just a memorial, a quick recollection of Jesus' actions with his disciples. Rather, it's a proclamation. And, even more it's a proclamation of Jesus' death - but not just any death, of course. Culturally, we think of death as permanent. You're dead, and that's that. But, with Jesus death is relative. So the death we proclaim didn't hold onto Jesus for eternity. He rose from the dead, and he's coming again. He died, but that wasn't the last word on the subject. The story has another chapter.

As such, when we gather to break bread and share the cup, our gathering, the meal, the assembly, the prayers, the elements - the whole thing - becomes a remembering of Jesus and the proclamation of his death - a death that was devastatingly real, but which was conquered nonetheless. So when we can lace our celebrations of Eucharist with this sentiment, we're doing a lot more than just not forgetting our Lord.//

This day, this Holy Thursday, beckons us to return to the table, to gather around the bread that has been offered to us, the cup that has been poured out for us. Yet this day will also send us out: away from the table and into the world, in search of those who hunger and thirst for what Christ gives: to us, through us.

This, then is the real quest: to discern what to do with what we have been given, and then to do it. What path will the bread and the cup - and the One who offers them - impel us to take as we walk through these Holy Days and into the joy of resurrection morn?