

## ***The New Covenant***

Luke 22: 7-20

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February 7, 2010

### **Luke 22:7-20 (NRSV)**

7 Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. 8 So Jesus\* sent Peter and John, saying, 'Go and prepare the Passover meal for us that we may eat it.' 9 They asked him, 'Where do you want us to make preparations for it?' 10 'Listen,' he said to them, 'when you have entered the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him into the house he enters 11 and say to the owner of the house, "The teacher asks you, 'Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' " 12 He will show you a large room upstairs, already furnished. Make preparations for us there.' 13 So they went and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal.

14 When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. 15 He said to them, 'I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; 16 for I tell you, I will not eat it\* until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.' 17 Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, 'Take this and divide it among yourselves; 18 for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.' 19 Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' 20 And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.'

Sandra was volunteering at a local soup kitchen the night she met Sheila. They sat at the same table, and over dinner Sheila began to tell her story. Her story began as a successful businesswoman and mother of two who volunteered at this soup kitchen, just like Sandra does now. Then unemployment followed by financial trouble followed by foreclosure followed by bad credit followed by child services stepping in until she could be a fitting parent to her children again. Broke, alone, and devastated, Sheila now was on the other side of the soup kitchen line, desperate to get her kids back and her life together. Sandra sat with her ears open and her heart wrenched. As she shared her story, Sheila stepped back and gathered a little perspective, "The meal... is what brings us together."<sup>1</sup> That one line might have been one of the greatest communion sermons ever uttered. The meal is what brings us together.

Today we gather to receive the ritual meal that brings us together, the Lord's Supper. It's a mysterious meal, mind you, received in worship, not enough food to feed anybody, although I do remember the time as a child when I took two pieces of bread because I was hungry. But it is a meal of symbols signifying God's saving act in Jesus Christ given for all of us. Luke's account of the first Lord's Supper provides some interesting opportunity for us to reflect on this symbolic, ritual meal, and what it means.

The first note Luke would have us make is that the Lord's Supper is a Passover meal. Jesus and his disciples were sitting at a table, not just eating, but eating ritually, remembering the saving work God had done for Israel when they were enslaved in Egypt. Passover, of course, is a Jewish high holy day and festival commemorating the Hebrews' escape from enslavement in Egypt. In the story of The Exodus, YHWH or God inflicted ten plagues upon the Egyptians so that Pharaoh the Egyptian king would release his Hebrew slaves. The tenth and final plague was the killing of all the firstborn. On the night the tenth plague came upon Egypt, the Hebrews were instructed by God to mark the doorposts of their homes with the blood of a spring lamb and, upon seeing this, the spirit of the Lord passed over or spared these homes, hence the term "passover". The Lord's Supper is a Passover meal, a meal commemorating the night that judgment was rendered and waived, the Israelite people were spared, the coast was made clear for an escape from their bondage.

So the Lord's Supper is born in the context of the Passover, a night remembering the saving act of God in Egypt, commemorating a new saving act of God, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For you theology nerds like me out there, there is so much amazing theology in this moment, a Lord's Supper born out of the Passover feast, it will make your head spin in delight. I invite you to meditate over such beautiful complexities this week.

But I'd just like for us to focus on one of the basic theological moves made by the Lord's Supper in the context of the Passover. And that is the movement of the divine presence from the Passover feast, when the spirit of the Lord was outside the home rendering judgment and passing over, to the Lord's Supper, when the spirit of the Lord is inside the home, at the table, in Jesus Christ, taking on all judgment so that all might be passed over. When Jesus talks of The New Covenant, I think it has something to do with this, renewing the eternal covenant to be with and for the people, just as God did in the Passover, but also revealing this covenant in a new way, with God in a seat at the table, present and visible, giving up his life to show us we're loved. This meal, this Lord's Supper, is what brings us together with God.

The Lord's Supper also brings us together with each other, and with everyone everywhere. We each come forward to the table, to take a seat at the table of the Lord, and the closer we come to the table, the closer we come to remembering God's presence right here, the closer we come to each other. We also confess that in Christ we are united with each other, with everyone everywhere, even those who have moved on to the next life. You might try picturing someone that you've loved and lost at this table with us. We symbolically gather at this table together, like a family would, all of us, and all share in the same saving love of God that we come to know in Jesus Christ.

A young man named Bobby got a visit from his pastor one day. Bobby was living at home with his parents, diagnosed with ALS. He talked to his pastor that day about lots of things, his children and Santa Claus, his love of ice cream all flavors, his electronic talking machine, and how much weight he'd lost during his battle. The pastor chose that moment to say to Bobby, "I can only imagine how hard this is for you." He nodded and began to tear up, and so did his pastor, who then asked Bobby, "What gives you comfort?" Immediately he began to type. And within seconds the electronic voice pronounced a single, monotone word, "company." He began to tell stories about all of the people from church who had dropped off meals and those who had stopped by to talk with Bobby.<sup>2</sup> This meal, the Lord's Supper, is what brings us together, in good company, so that as God's life is poured out for us, we too might pour out our life for each other.

This particular meal, which brings us together with God and with each other, is also our taste of the kingdom to come. It might be the only moment all month that points toward a time when we're fully mindful of God, when we're gathered together in mutual favor and love. While love and peace and justice do not yet reign on earth, they do reign at this table, and so we come to get a glimpse of it, a taste of it, and in a strange way remember the future that God wills, the future that is our divinely created destiny.

Jesus Christ gives us The Lord's Supper to remember and to anticipate, and to open our eyes to the present and active Spirit of the Lord in the world working through all of us. Perhaps we will be fueled in the way we live our lives by this taste of that kingdom coming, do a little work for someone else to spread the cause of love. Or perhaps, too, we'll have our eyes opened to the small good moments that remind us that God is coming.

A comic strip one Christmas Eve some years ago showed a crowd in a village looking wonderingly at a brilliant star in the sky. A small boy asks his mother, "Is that bright star where heaven is, Mom?" "Maybe," she answers, "Or maybe this is." And that's it. The meal brings us together, and points to the light, and suddenly, if but for a moment, heaven appears all around us. Come, taste, and see.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ode Magazine*, January 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston told this story in a sermon for Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York City.