

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. Lent is a forty-day period between Ash Wednesday and Easter, excluding Sundays. It is a time of self-examination, self-reflection, repentance and spiritual growth for Christians. Every so often as Christians we need to take time and reflect on our relationship with the Lord. Lent is a time for questions such as: “Who is Jesus Christ to me? What is my personal relationship with Him? What must I do to grow closer to Him?”

To truly understand who Jesus is and what He had done for us, we need to focus on what happened just prior to the Resurrection on Easter morning. Too often we rush from Palm Sunday with the shouts of “Hosanna, blessed is He who comes in the name to the Lord” to the praises on Easter morning of “He is Risen,” and overlook all that happened during the end of the Holy Week prior to the crucifixion. So, this year during Lent, I want to focus on the 24 hours between the Last Supper and the crucifixion. We will be using Adam Hamilton’s book *24 Hours That Changed the World* as our reference. As we study the events during these final hours, I hope that you can identify with the characters and become part of the story. I also hope that you will gain a greater appreciation of all that our Lord and Savior suffered and did for us.

We will be using the Gospel of Mark as our primary scripture source since it is probably the first gospel written. Now Jesus arrived in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday with crowds following Him and waving palm branches. Each day He taught in the Temple. Because the religious leaders had drifted from God and His commandments, they were the subject of a lot of Jesus’ criticism. Of course, this angered them and they began to plot His death. With this background, let’s begin our journey on Thursday evening with a meal, or more precisely, the preparations for a meal in the fourteenth chapter of the Gospel of Mark, verses 12 through 25.

Read Mark 14:12-25

Jesus’ disciples came to Him and asked where He wanted to eat the Passover meal that night. The Gospel of Luke identifies the two disciples as Peter and John. Jesus told them to go into the city and follow a man carrying a water jar; he would lead them to the Upper Room where they would share the meal. Now at first glance this sounds difficult, how would they know which man to follow, but you have to understand the culture back then. Men did not carry water jars; that was the role for the women. So, it would be easy to identify this man in the crowd.

After God had delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and brought them to the Promised Land, the Israelites annually celebrated the Passover or Seder Meal during the Feast of Unleavened Bread to remember their escape from bondage. If you remember as we discussed last Sunday, God sent Moses to lead His people out of Egypt. Pharaoh initially refused to let them go; so God sent a series of plagues upon the Egyptians; the final one being the death of the firstborn in every household and among the flocks throughout the land of Egypt. On that

dreadful night the Israelites were to sacrifice an unblemished lamb to God and mark the doorposts on their homes with its blood. As the Angel of Death passed over Egypt, it passed over the homes marked by the blood of the lamb, thus sparing the firstborn of the Israelites.

Today Jews still celebrate the Passover Seder Meal. This meal, like our communion, is filled with ritual, and the story of Israel's deliverance is retold through the food of the meal. The bitter herbs of horseradish and parsley are reminders of the bitterness that the Israelites had experienced when they were slaves in Egypt. The herbs are dipped in salt water, which represented their tears. They have a pureed apple mixture meant to look like the mortar from which the Israelites made bricks for Pharaoh's building projects. An egg is used to remind the participants of the new beginning Israel experienced. The unleavened matzoh is a reminder of the haste of the Israelites' escape. And of course, the lamb is a reminder of the Passover lamb whose blood marked the doorposts. Finally, four different small cups of wine are provided as a reminder of God's promises that He would redeem the Israelites.

Now the disciples must have been confused by Jesus' words. The Passover meal was meant to be a time of joy and celebration, retelling the story of God's deliverance of His people from slavery in Egypt. In addition, some of the disciples were convinced that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, and that they were in Jerusalem during Passover so that He could claim His kingdom. It was their hope that Jesus would overthrow the hated Roman Empire, and once again free their people from captivity. After all, just four days earlier, Jesus had been welcomed like a king as He rode into Jerusalem. But now He was talking about His blood being shed, about dying. This was not normal dinner time conversation; something was different.

When Jesus said in Matthew 26:28: "This is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins," He changed everything. He transformed the Passover meal reserved for the Jewish people into Holy Communion for all people. The Israelites had become a covenant people by the blood sacrifice of animals; now the Last Supper was the establishment of a new covenant by the blood of Jesus Christ, not only with the tribes of Israel, but with all of humanity. While the Passover was once the story of God's liberation of the Israelites; the Lord's Supper would become the story of God's liberation of all people from slavery to sin and death. Through Jesus Christ, God gives each of us the opportunity for a new life and a new beginning.

Not only did Jesus confuse His disciples by talking about the shedding of His blood, but midway through the meal He shocked again them by stating: "I tell you the truth; one of you will betray me." Now Jesus knew who it was, but He didn't say. Thus, this joyful celebration and remembrance is quickly turned into a time of questions and suspension; with everybody looking at each other wondering who Jesus is talking about. Of course, it's not just Judas who will betray Jesus before the night was over; Peter will deny knowing Him three times in the

courtyard of the High Priest; and all the disciples will desert Him and run for their lives in the Garden of Gethsemane, leaving Jesus utterly alone to face the trial and the crucifixion at the hands of His enemies.

Think about it; Jesus might as well have said to us: "All of you will betray me!" When have we acted like Judas, Peter and the other disciples? When have we betrayed Jesus? Let's be honest, we can betray Jesus in many ways, such as by our lifestyle. We can be holier than thou on Sunday morning, and then live the rest of the week as if we had never heard of Jesus Christ. We can also betray Him in our giving when we satisfy our personal desires and passions, and then only give Him what's left over. We betray Him when we refuse to tell others about Him and keep the good news to ourselves. Finally, we betray Jesus when we don't put Him first in our life; when He is not our first love.

Each time we celebrate communion, we should remember this part of the story where Jesus acknowledges the betrayal, denial, and desertions that follow. This may be why the church has traditionally included statements of confession and repentance in the liturgy prior to receiving the bread and juice. For example, the traditional liturgy for this morning includes the following: "Merciful God, we confess that we have not loved you with our whole heart. We have failed to be an obedient church. We have not done your will, we have broken your law, we have rebelled against your love, we have not loved our neighbors, and we have not heard the cry of the needy. Forgive us, we pray. Free us for joyful obedience, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

Now despite the fact that we all fail at times to live up to the love and grace that Jesus offers each of us, we can all take assurance in how Jesus treated His disciples. Jesus knew that Judas would betray Him, that Peter would deny Him, and that all the disciples would desert Him; yet He displayed extraordinary grace toward them at the meal. He had Judas sitting at His left, a place of honor; and as recorded in the Gospel of John He washed the feet of Peter and the other disciples; and then He shared His final meal with them. Jesus looked past their betrayal, their sins, and their failures, and called them His friends. We can take comfort in the knowledge that He will do the same for us as we receive communion. Remember our communion liturgy after the confession: "Hear the Good News: Christ died for us while we were yet sinners; that proves God's love toward us. In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven!"

Now there are certain things in life that define us. For the Jewish people it was the Passover and was summed up in the words: "We were once slaves, but now we're free." For you and me as Christians, our defining story is accompanied by a meal and these words: "On the night when He was betrayed Jesus took bread, and when He had given thanks, broke it, gave it to His disciples and said: 'This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way, after supper He took the cup, saying: 'This cup is my blood of the new covenant; do

this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For as often as you eat the bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes." The Lord's Supper and these words define us as Christians.

Just as the Passover is a constant reminder and proclamation of God's deliverance of Israel from bondage and slavery in Egypt, so is our participation in Holy Communion an act of remembering and proclaiming the deliverance of all believers from the bondage of sin through Jesus' atoning sacrifice on the cross. As the Passover is a celebration of what God has done for the Jewish people, so is the Lord's Supper a celebration of what Jesus Christ has done and is doing for us. It defines us as His followers. It reminds us that no matter where we came from or what we have done there is always room at the table and that God's grace and forgiveness is always available to those who seek Him with all their heart.

Studying this passage from Mark brings up an interesting question: if you knew that you had just one more day to live, who would you eat your final meal with? Who would you spend those final hours with? No doubt family members would be there and some close friends. At the Last Supper, Jesus sat with His disciples, a band of misfits, if there ever was. There were fishermen, a tax collector, a zealot who wanted to kill the Romans, a doubter, and a traitor. One would betray Him, one would deny Him, and all would desert Him, but they were still His friends. In breaking bread with them, He showed His love for them.

Now while I would not call us misfits, we all come from many different backgrounds, occupations, and religious and political beliefs. However, we are a band of brothers and sisters united in Jesus Christ. We gather at the communion table as equals. We gather in love and support of each other. This unity, this meal defines who we are as Christians and a Church.

When we stop and carefully examine the scripture passages concerning the Lord's Supper, we can begin to appreciate its meaning and purpose in the life of the church and our lives. It is a gift from our Lord and Savior; one that He left us so that we would not forget what He did for us on Calvary. Without this periodic jog to our memory, we might fall into the trap of believing that we can earn our own salvation; that we deserve it; that it's an entitlement. But we would be wrong; it is a gift from God to us as a result of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross when He took all our sins upon His shoulders so that we could be free from the threat and burden of sin and death forever.

So let us now prepare to share in this meal with the disciples of long ago. We like them have at times betrayed, denied and deserted Jesus, but like them, He has forgiven us and calls us His friends. Come and realize that this sacrament is given to you out of love, love that never ends. Come and experience God's love and grace. Amen