

Maundy Thursday
Mark
April 9, 2009

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As the ate they told the story again. Hearing the groaning of his people in Egypt, God rescued them. God sent Moses to do it. With great and mighty deeds, God brought his people out of Egypt into a land he had prepared for them. For a God to reveal God's self, to make God known, claim this people as God's own, rescue them, make of them a people defined not by how the Pharaoh did things in Egypt, but based on God's law.¹ It was a great story. It was the story of the greatest thing God had ever done.

To remember it, they told the story every year. That is where the meal comes in. The instructions are plain and clear. Your family had to get an unblemished lamb. Some, of course, could not afford that, so the tradition developed that you went in on the deal with your neighbors. There was even a little ritual around several sharing of one lamb. Standing in a circle about the lamb you and your neighbors would reach out and touch the communal lamb and announce, "This is my body," and in that way one lamb could serve many people.² Anyway, take one unblemished lamb, roast it, serve it with bitter herbs (to remember your hard times in Egypt) and unleavened bread (when salvation comes it will be swift and one best not miss it by waiting for bread to rise), and eat it with your family. Smear the blood of the lamb over the lintel of your house. The angel of death would know to "pass over" that house and spare the first born males there. All this was to be done ready to go. For when the meal is over, God will act quickly and nothing will be the same again.

We are here today to remember the greatest thing God has ever done.³ It was within one of those Passover meals that Jesus did something startling. They had prepared the meal in the normal prescribed way.

And then Jesus took a piece of the unleavened bread, broke it, and gave it to them and said – you know what he said – he said, "This is my body." And then he took a cup of

¹ This is Walter Brueggeman's theme in *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*

² This was told me by Dr. Lawrence A. Hoffman, Notre Dame University, in a lecture delivered at Congregation Emanuel, Denver, Colorado, Spring 2000.

³ The parallelism is not accidental: ". . . The perception of Passover as a time of redemption and sacrifice originates in the Bible that Jews and Christians shared." Israel J. Yuval, "Early Jewish-Christian Dialogue," *Passover and Easter: Origin and History to Modern Times*, ed. by Paul F. Bradshaw and Lawrence A. Hoffman (Notred Dame: The University Press, 1999), p. 103.

wine – one of the traditional four cups of the Passover meal – and said, “This is my blood.”

They ate and drank, probably without knowing exactly what had happened. And they sang a hymn and went out to the Mount of Olives. And that is when God acted quickly to perform the greatest “exodus” ever accomplished. God saved not just God’s people this time. God saved all people. It is the greatest thing God had ever done.

By the lambs they shared in Egypt, the Israelites were saved. And now by this lamb shared, by this lamb’s body and blood, they are all saved.

If we are to be saved in any way that makes sense, God will have to do it.⁴ That is the story of this week. Just where you and I are most guilty, God forgives us. Just at the point where the disciples are in deepest trouble, just when we have done the deed and then all run away, God forgives. It is right there where all of our schemes yield to God’s decision and action. God takes it upon God’s self to right the matter. “Only one thing would help us: if God Himself [sic] would intervene, if He Himself [sic] were to remove the obstacle – and this means forgiveness.”⁵ And that is exactly what God does this week. Just when you and I strive to “regulate our relationship with God” on our own, we are “benched for a substitute.”⁶ Take it personally. It’s the greatest thing God has ever done.

And at the same time it is a great mystery. It will not become less when we try to explain it, discuss it, or even when we revere it. And so we will eat it. Just as the people of God remembered the great Exodus God performed in Egypt by claiming and eating a lamb, bitter herbs, unleavened bread, and wine; so too shall we through bread and wine place God’s greatest action between our lips. And there shall we eat God’s promises. This is what the promises of God taste like.⁷ Take it personally. It is the greatest thing God has ever done, and God has done it *for you*.

Here God promises God’s presence. In, with, and under the bread and the wine, God is present. Here God promises forgiveness. The very matter we could not accomplish on our own, reconciliation, friendship with God again, God gives as gift. Here God promises a life of discipleship. For God is not to be learned about. Life with God is to be lived even. Here God makes these promises forever. There is no condition or limit to the

⁴ The cross “represents an *objective* transaction, in which God actually *does* something, and something which is absolutely necessary.” Emil Brunner, *The Mediator*, Trans. by Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1947), p. 439.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 446.

⁶ Gerhard Forde, “Jesus Died for You,” *A More Radical Gospel: Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Ecumenism* (Grand Rapids: Westminster, 2004), p. 221.

⁷ Attributed to Alvin Rogness.

giving of these gifts. This is a “strange and marvelous strife,” and it is the greatest thing God has ever done.⁸

There is, of course, much to be endured after this summer is ended. From the Mount of Olives onward, we shall all drop away. *All* emphasizes the Gospel of Mark. There will be a cross to be cringed before and a death to be witnessed. But somehow this supper will bind us to him in such a way that not even our own abandonment of him will be effective. Our betrayal will not, in the end, work. And at another time we shall have this meal again, in bread and wine bound to the promises of God, we shall remember the greatest thing God has ever done. And our world will never be the same. Amen.

⁸ Phrase attributed to Martin Luther in Forde, *op. cit.*, 222.