

MAUNDY THURSDAY

Christ Our Savior Evangelical Lutheran Church

The Connection of Communion

Exodus 12:1-12

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in Egypt, ²“This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year. ³Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household. ⁴If any household is too small for a whole lamb, they must share one with their nearest neighbor, having taken into account the number of people there are. You are to determine the amount of lamb needed in accordance with what each person will eat. ⁵The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect, and you may take them from the sheep or the goats. ⁶Take care of them until the fourteenth day of the month, when all the members of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight. ⁷Then they are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses where they eat the lambs. ⁸That same night they are to eat the meat roasted over the fire, along with bitter herbs, and bread made without yeast. ⁹Do not eat the meat raw or boiled in water, but roast it over a fire—with the head, legs and internal organs. ¹⁰Do not leave any of it till morning; if some is left till morning, you must burn it. ¹¹This is how you are to eat it: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the LORD’s Passover. ¹²“On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn of both people and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. ¹³The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt. ¹⁴“This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD—a lasting ordinance.

“The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in Egypt,...’This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD—a lasting ordinance.’” And so that is what they did. Year after year, decade after decade, century after century, millennium after millennium, God’s people came together on the night of the 14th of Nisan and celebrated with a special feast—the Passover meal. It was a meal which connected the Jewish faithful with their past, their present, and their future. And it was during this special meal that the Lord Jesus took some of the unleavened bread at the table, gave thanks and give it to his disciples saying, “This is my body” together with the cup of wine of which he said, “This is my blood.” There will forever be a close connection between the Passover feast and the meal we have come to know as the Lord’s Supper. Just like with the Passover meal, Holy Communion connects us with our past, with our present, and with our future.

Over the centuries it become a custom at the Passover meal, for the youngest son of the family to ask the question, “Why is this night different than all other nights?” The father would then explain the reason they were eating a meal consisting of lamb, bitter herbs and unleavened bread. In doing this, those celebrating the Passover would be connected with their past history. They were connected with the first Passover which we heard described in our First Lesson tonight. The lamb reminded them of the lamb whose blood was painted on the Israelites doorposts so that the terrible plague upon the firstborn children of Egypt would not come to their house. Death would pass them over. The bitter herbs were a reminder of the harsh life that the Israelites experienced as slaves in Egypt before the Lord safely delivered them to the Promised Land. The unleavened bread reminded them that the people left quickly at the time set aside by the Lord who miraculously freed them from slavery. The meal was a reminder of their history. Their history was a reminder of God’s grace and mercy which had been with their ancestors and was still with them today.

Imagine the night of the Passover meal described in our Gospel reading tonight. Think of one of Jesus’ disciples playing the role of the son at the feast and asking the question: “Why is this night different than all other nights?” And then think of Jesus himself describing the first Passover—the miraculous delivery of the Israelites from a life of slavery and the grace of God which had been with his people every since. Then think of Jesus instituting a new meal to teach the history of God’s salvation and grace to his followers from that day forward. He told them of his body and blood, given and shed, for the forgiveness of sins. He told them to take and eat and as often as they did, to remember him and his sacrifice. And so they did as they were told. Week after week, month after month, year after year, decade...century...millennium until today. When we come together to eat the meal that Jesus instituted on that night, we do so to remember his mercy and grace shown for us by his sacrifice on the cross. We are never closer to Calvary than at the communion rail where we receive the body given for us and the blood shed for us.

The Passover meal was not only a celebration of the past for the Israelites. It also spoke of their present fellowship of faith. As the family ate that meal together, they were united in their common bond of faith in the LORD. They were also united with the other households throughout Jerusalem who were eating lambs that had been sacrificed on the same altar at the temple. Just like the other covenant sacrifices which we have described in our services throughout the Lenten season, the Passover sacrifice was a sign of the special relationship God had with those who offered such sacrifices proscribed by his Law. They were his people. He was their God. The Passover feast was a special celebration of that fact.

As Jesus and his disciples came together to celebrate the Passover one last time together, it was certainly a meal that bound them together. After all the dramatic events that had taken place over the course of the past week, it must have been encouraging to have some time to fellowship with a meal that reminded them of the unity they shared as followers of the one true God and his Son Jesus Christ. But as great as that fellowship was, we know that it was not perfect. During the meal, Jesus let them know that there was one in their midst who was not united with them—who was intending to betray his Lord. And after the meal finished, their unity was further shattered by the way they reacted to Jesus' arrest and fled from him in his hour of trial. This highlights the very reason why Jesus gave them a new meal to celebrate that night. As the heart of the Lord's Supper is Jesus' body and blood given for the forgiveness of sins. The fellowship and unity of the Lord's Supper is one based on forgiveness. It is only because of God's forgiveness through Jesus Christ that his followers are united with their Lord and with each other. This is the forgiveness the Lord's Supper proclaims and offers every time it is celebrated. This is the forgiveness that unites us as brothers and sisters in Christ and gives us a common bond of faith to celebrate in the Sacrament. We could say that we are never closer to our Lord and to our family faith than we are as we commune together.

In practice, the Passover meal, more than any other celebration for the Jews, was celebrated with an eye toward the future deliverance by the Messiah. It was part of Jewish tradition that many of the great events in Israel's history took place on the Passover. They believed it was at the time of the Passover when Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed, when Gideon defeated the Midianites, when the Assyrian King Sennacherib's army was destroyed during the reign of Hezekiah, when the king of Babylon saw the handwriting on the wall, and when wicked Haman was killed as Esther and the Jews fasted. And so they believed that it would be at Passover time when the Messiah would defeat Israel's enemies once and for all. For this reason, even today as Jews celebrate the Passover, there is a point when they open the door so that Elijah might come, the forerunner of the Messiah. We know that the deliverance the Jews longed for as they celebrated the Passover year after year was provided through the blood of Christ. This is why it is so fitting that Jesus used this meal as the setting for the new Passover feast which celebrates the work of the Messiah on our behalf.

As we take Holy Communion, we do not do it looking forward to the coming of the Messiah to deliver us from sin, death and the devil. That coming has already taken place. But we do take Holy Communion with an eye looking forward to his second coming on the great Day of Resurrection. As we heard Jesus give us this meal tonight, he said to his disciples, *"Truly I tell you, I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God."* The meal that we enjoy in Holy Communion is a small taste of the heavenly banquet that our Savior has prepared for us. It is also a reminder of the great fellowship with the Lord that is being enjoyed even now by those who have died in the faith. This aspect of the Lord's Supper is one that can be especially appreciated by those who have laid loved ones to rest. A few years ago, my mother went home to the Lord. I will always remember a sympathy card I received from a dear friend because of what she inscribed on it: "Heaven seems closer the more people we love are already there." It is true. The more people we know who go to be with the Savior the more we sense the reality of heaven and long to be by their side. In a sense, we can say that we are never closer to heaven and to those who are already there than when we celebrate the Lord's Supper. As we just sang in the final verse of our Hymn of the Day: *"Feast after feast thus comes and passes by, Yet, passing, points to that glad feast above, Giving sweet foretaste of the festal joy, the Lamb's great marriage feast of bliss and love."*

What a wonderful feast the Lord has given us to celebrate. What a great celebration of our past, our present and our future—the past deliverance from sin at the cross, our present fellowship with God and our family of faith and our future joy at the wedding supper of the Lamb. **Amen.**