

The Lord's Supper as Passover Meal

I would like to use our sermon time tonight to sort out with some precision what it means for you and me to share in this Eucharistic meal, especially on Maundy Thursday when we commemorate the Last Supper.

My first thought is that, if ever there was a time when God was in control of the timing and circumstances, it was in having Jesus' death and the establishment of the Lord's Supper in conjunction with the Passover celebration in Jerusalem. Put bluntly, what you and I are doing in this sacrament is a Christian version of the Passover Meal.

Second thought: Passover is the central Jewish commemoration of how God protected the Hebrew slaves in Egypt and set them free from slavery in Egypt. There are two operative words here, namely protected and setting free. I'll take them in turn. Back in Egypt, when God was afflicting the Egyptians with the plagues, the culminating and worst plague was a terrible pestilence that killed all of the first born livestock and humans. Before that plague, God instructed Moses to have the people slaughter a lamb and daub some of the lamb's blood on the doorposts and lintels of their houses. When the plague came, God would see the blood on the Hebrew's houses and he would pass over that house. Only the unprotected Egyptian houses endured the full force of the pestilence.

Not surprisingly, the trauma of the killing of the first born was sufficient for the Egyptian Pharaoh to declare that the Hebrews could leave Egypt. Obviously, having them in his kingdom was far too

troublesome and dangerous for their slavery to continue. So through the plagues and especially that final plague, Moses' people were set free from their slavery. Protection was involved. Liberation was involved.

Third thought: when Jesus sits his disciples down and has a Passover-like meal with them we can expect that the original Passover will help us to understand what Jesus had in mind in feeding his disciples at his newly instituted Christian Passover or Holy Communion table. Here's how I would describe it. When Jesus takes the bread and breaks it, together with passing around the cup, he is clearly talking about his own coming death. It's unmistakable: "This is me—broken for you."

Jesus' death corresponds with the Passover killing of the lambs. When you and I ingest the bread and drink from the cup, we are doing in a Christian way what the ancient Hebrews did at the time of the Passover. We are appropriating the blood of Jesus Christ to protect us and to deliver us. Put differently, when you and I eat and drink the cup and bread, we are participating in Jesus' death. We are not dying. We are identifying ourselves with Jesus' death. He does the dying. In the process, we are protected from God's judgment on evil in the world, just as the Hebrews were protected from God's judgment on the Egyptians. Further, we are delivered from the grip of oppression in our lives, in the same manner that the Hebrews were released from slavery and were free to walk out of Egypt. Just as the first Passover was about protection and liberation, so is this

Christian version of the Passover meal about protection and liberation.

Someone says, "That explanation sounds like a different spin on what I was thinking, namely that Jesus' death on the cross brings forgiveness for our sins." My response to that is, you are certainly correct in interpreting the cross as bringing forgiveness for our wickedness and foolishness. But there is very strong warrant for what I'm saying this evening. There is a Jewish holiday called Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur means Day of Atonement. If your main interpretation of Jesus' death and the last supper which connects us with is forgiveness or atonement, you have to wonder why Jesus didn't choose to arrive in Jerusalem on the eve of Yom Kippur. In fact, he—doubtless inspired by God's guidance—chose the Passover. In doing so, he lifts up protection and liberation as the main—but not only—meanings of his death and this meal.

What are you and I getting here as we prepare to eat and drink? At this table we are drawn into the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We are somehow connected with it in a powerful and lasting way. In being connected with Jesus we are also protected from judgment. The holiness and righteousness of God, which cannot tolerate sin and unrighteousness, has been turned away from our houses. We are being spared from the dominion of sin and evil so we may be delivered into new life.

Think of a prison door suddenly unlocked. Think of a prison sentence suddenly being overturned. Something new is established that

permits you and me to walk out of the door of the prisons in our lives and to walk in newness of life itself.

What is your prison? What is your Egypt? Is it scratching and clawing your way into a social position or job status? Is it fulfilling someone else's ideal for your life? Is it approval addiction? Or any addiction? Is your prison pride? Pride is the deep conviction that you need nothing for living except yourself. Pride is what drives us to keep God forever at arm's length. Is your prison unforgiveness? Have you organized your life around a bitterness that has come to define your being? Are you in the prison of sloth. You stay in slavery because you lack the fortitude to put forth the energy to break out.

What is lifted up at this meal—this Christian Passover meal—is that a new arrangement (covenant) has been inaugurated. It's an emancipation proclamation. You're free. Servitude to any unworthy Pharaoh is finished. Stand up and walk. Nothing prevents the great journey in Jesus' company from beginning—now.