

April 5, 2007

The New Passover Covenant

Exodus 12:1-27
Luke 22:7-8, 13-23

At the time Jesus and His twelve apostles celebrated what we now call “the Last Supper,” the Passover Meal was already an ancient tradition. To this day our Jewish sisters and brothers gather every year at this time of year to enjoy the meal and lift the cup together [four ritual times]. They celebrate the faithfulness of God who delivered the Israelites, their ancestors and ours, from slavery in Egypt. Passover is a celebration of rescue, of freedom. Obviously that was a bittersweet celebration between Jesus and His followers that last evening they had together in this world—and one we can better understand if we know more about the Passover dinner they were observing.

The original Passover [from the Hebrew word “pesach”—to pass or skip] occurred while the Israelites had been slaves in Egypt about four centuries; maybe the 14th Century before Christ. You remember God assigned Moses to go tell Pharaoh to “let my people go”—so that they could go out and worship God. Pharaoh kept waffling, promising and breaking his promise, until the tenth plague was threatened and let loose: the death of the firstborn sons. To the ancients (and to many non-Westernized peoples today) “the life was in the blood,” and the sacrifice of the firstborn was the appropriate response to the gods. (The God of Israel, the God of Abraham, *never* wanted nor sanctioned human sacrifice, unlike virtually every other religion in the area. The issue of the sacrifice of Abraham’s firstborn son Isaac was especially dramatic for this reason.)

The Covenant People understood that God needed to cause death to come upon the firstborn sons of all those in the land of Egypt since Pharaoh had not responded to any of the lesser incentives, the nine previous plagues. (Make that almost all of the firstborn sons;) as we heard in Exodus 12, God had forewarned Moses and told him how to preserve the lives and the future of the Israelites: each family was to sacrifice an unblemished young lamb according to specific instructions.

As they obeyed those instructions, the angel of death which would afflict the other households in Egypt would “pass over” and spare those covenant families who did as Moses had told. Moses had told them to kill the young lamb, and then to take the blood and to mark the two sides and over the top of the frame of the doorway. Those would be spared (some would say “saved”) by the blood of the lamb: those who trusted God and obeyed the divine commandment given thru Moses.

The timing of that initial “Passover” was indefinite. The people were to eat with their boots on, as it were. They were to be ready to obey and get marching at a moment’s notice. There wasn’t even time to allow the bread to rise.

There were also practical considerations to that first Passover meal. The journey ahead would be arduous—not only physically, trying to outrace the pursuing chariots of Pharaoh, who again changed his mind at the last minute and decided he did not want to lose his cheap labor force after all, but emotionally and spiritually. Who could imagine the challenges confronting a people who had known nothing but to be slaves, victims, with absolutely no practice at exercising personal freedoms or civil responsibilities. Soon enough they would need to be a community of people governing themselves, trusting in God to provide for their every need (and soon enough, within two months, they were “murmuring,” complaining to Moses, about this new burden of being free and responsible and obeying God—their preliminary conclusion was that freedom is vastly overrated...)

This meal provided them fuel (and not just calories) for the journey into the vast unknown: it particularly became the source of a shared memory of how God had heard their prayers and taken their side and interceded within human history to let them go.

Maybe it's only a coincidence that this is the only one of the major Jewish feasts celebrated at night. The people were confronted by "unknowns" on every side. If their jailbreak to the Red Sea failed and they were caught, who knew the penalty? If Moses had "heard" the timing as to when to "get going" wrong from God, what then? They were marching straight into a dangerous unknown with no security whatsoever other than the presumed promise of God to Moses, and they were new together, with Moses as their leader. That darkness was more than nocturnal: it must also have been metaphorical. (I don't need to explain: I assume we have all felt the need, the "call," to go forward into the unknown when the consequences are great and we have no assurance other than the promise of God, and that in a "still, small voice"? Surely we have all known the anxiety of needing to leave the familiar behind, to venture forward when it feels like night, feels as if we were cut off from the guidance of, sometimes even the presence of God?)

Moses had also instructed the covenant people to remember and memorialize the Passover. They were doing just that at the time of Jesus, and still do to this day (every 15th of Nisan.) Our human memories are fickle and selective. How many of us know the stories even about our own great grandparents? When you see a photo of a cemetery—perhaps the stark crosses and stars of David memorializing the gallant young men who gave their lives for their country and their fellow citizens at Normandy—do you wonder how many people still remember those who buried in those graves?

The Passover meal was to be celebrated each year: not because God wants the Jews or anyone else to live in the past, but so that they should never forget the saving acts of God: "Forget not all of His benefits..." but "remember His marvelous deeds..." The goodness and faithfulness of God extend beyond the memory of a generation or two; the people of God were to continually remember, and teach their children of their divine rescue. (The Passover Dinner was like a wedding band: Trish and I were married at some point in the past, but we continue to wear our rings to remind ourselves of the covenant promise we have freely chosen, freely entered into.)

[We would not know it from what we heard in Exodus, but unlike a lamb which was sacrificed as a "sin offering" in the Jewish temple practice and all burned up and never eaten, a lamb sacrificed for the Passover celebration was consumed entirely. It was understood as a renewal of the covenant—perhaps even that original covenant between Abraham and God, do you remember where Abraham walked back and forth between the halves of the five animals, back in Genesis 15? (Primitive to us, but that's how they ratified covenants back then. With blood shed and life given up.) Just before God assigned Moses to go speak to Pharaoh, we are reminded "God heard their groanings; God remembered His covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob." [Gen 2:24]

How thick was the darkness that night in Jerusalem, that Last Supper: Jesus and His twelve knew the end was near. How great the unknown future—all the more ominous since it was apparently going to have to be lived apart from their beloved Leader and Master, Jesus. Fear lurked just outside that door (the doorway into an Upper Room some believe is still there, though remodeled a millennia ago in Crusader style.) It was seeping in thru the windows, thru that doorway. All hell was about to break loose. They

were edgy, jumpy. (Why else would Peter have protested so strongly that he would go to prison, even go to death for Jesus—he would never betray His Lord...)

Understanding some of this helps make it clear why Paul wrote, for example, “Christ is our Passover Lamb; therefore let us celebrate the new feast...” [I Cor 5:7-8] When we understand the importance of the sacrifice of the firstborn to the ancients, and the connection between that perfect young lamb without blemish which was to be sacrificed on the original Passover night in Egypt in order to save the people from death, and later in Jewish history the sacrifice of the spotless lambs slain for the forgiveness of sin, it’s clear enough how the early church came to understand the death of Jesus as the Passover Lamb who was slain to take away the sin of the world. [More on this tomorrow night: Good Friday.]

However it’s also important to be clear that Jesus never understood Himself to be forced or pressured to do anything against His will. (“This is My body, freely given for you...”—not “stolen from Me.”) And it is unthinkable that the divine Father who always opposed human sacrifice when the Israelites in Canaan were surrounded by it on every side, the One who stayed the hand of Abraham ready to take the life of Isaac, would now decide He needed the blood of an unwilling human victim. The God of Abraham is not Baal or Quetzalcoatl! Jesus *reveals* God; Jesus does not *oppose* God.

Jesus observed the Passover, but made it new. He had come to believe He was the Messiah; He was the One thru whom the ancient promise of Jeremiah would come true: “The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt--a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. [Jer 13:31-34]

Jesus understood that in Him and in His Holy Spirit this promised new covenant would come about: that God would replace those tablets of stone with new hearts within His people; that God would replace the exterior Law of “dos and don’ts” and “what’s the least I need to do to get a passing grade” with the interior spirit of obedience and love and communion with the living God, with the Holy Spirit, God available within us. Jesus understood that God would place in His people a heart full of gratitude and eager for relationship and intimate connection; that His people would obey Him for love rather than out of shame or guilt or manipulation. (Some of His people would run thru walls for Him, and venture boldly in His name, some would bring cups of cold water to the thirsty and the good news of Jesus Christ to our neighbors; some would freely give up their lives sooner than betray their Lord and Savior. Almost every one in that Upper Room eventually did.) On the other hand, it’s true none of us is all the way there yet...

Jesus understood that there is not enough blood in all the animals in the world to restore us back into right relationship—even within ourselves; or with our spouses, or with each other, with our neighbors, with our world, with the God who agonizes over us as we have gone our merry way and fiddle around with the freedom, the Deliverance He

has paid such a High Price to offer us. In Christ, the ceremonial has become actual; the old covenant has become New, sealed in His blood about to be freely poured out for our sake... There is no bondage, no slavery, which can rival the power of the mercy of God poured out in the life of Jesus Christ the Son.

Jesus did freely choose to pour out His life for the sin of the world. I believe He had come, reluctantly, to the conclusion that the only possible chance to overcome the very sin and evil waiting to torture and murder Him the next day was to offer Himself freely into its clutches, into its power. To walk knowingly into its terrible trap. He understood that the will of God the Father was for Him not to turn and run, but for Him to stand and continue to speak the truth, live the truth, be the Truth. “God is love,” not “let’s surrender and call the whole thing off.”

So He led His followers in those “Hallel” Passover psalms (songs) of praise and headed out to the Kidron Valley and beyond to the Garden of Gethsemane, to wrestle in a way none of us will ever imagine. Even as He surmised what was to come, however, He chose not to give in to the darkness, to the doom gathering outside the door of that dinner. Unlike Socrates who drank his hemlock with pronounced equanimity because he didn’t have much use for life in this physical plane or for the mass of ignorant Athenians anyway, Jesus loved this life and He loved His followers. He agonized over giving up His life as only a man could who had loved it to the full.

It cost Jesus awfully, but still He chose to offer His life for His closest friends. That cup of wine prescribed for the Passover meal—take, and drink of it—but think of it as the blood He chose to offer, His life poured out, that you and I and everybody else, too, might live anew, and live in His harmony, and live eternally. The bread, take and eat it—so that You may share in His love, in His kind of life given for others, which obeys the will of the Father come what may.

One thing more. We probably agreed “none of us is all the way there yet.” Jesus was surrounded at the table with His closest friends. We may be wondering whether that description could possibly include folks like you and me at His table. I am so glad He included Peter who would betray Him, and James and John who would fall fast asleep when He needed them, and Judas who was to sell His Lord for cash.

Everyone gets invited. If Judas and Peter are invited, surely there’s room for you and me, for people who too often take for granted and presume upon His constant mercy, for people who consider worshiping God an occasional lifestyle option; for people who would sometimes rather go shopping or watch TV than get involved on His team; for people who cram our schedules so impossibly full with everything else—“oops,” sorry, too little time for You or Your church, Jesus. There’s room at His table for people who follow Him nicely in the warmth of the noonday, when times are good—then panic when the dark nights come. There’s room for people who have a few good days at being brave, then wimp out at the first hint of “pushback” from our acquaintances. For people who know quite clearly what it is God is requiring of us just now, at this moment in our lives, yet keep stalling for more time—we’re not quite ready to march out into costly obedience just yet.

Jesus knows just who we are. Still, He invites us again into the ancient covenant, and into His new covenant:

“I will be your God, and you will be My people...”

“Eat My body...drink My blood poured out for you for the forgiveness of sin”...Exchange your old life, lived for yourself, for My New Life, lived for the love of God.