

A Complicated Table

Psalm 23; Luke 22:14-38

Well, it's a long passage and well familiar to most of us, so I will make some remarks and we live out the meal Jesus has prepared for us tonight. First, I want to note that both the parade on Palm Sunday and the meal on Maundy Thursday are introduced by Jesus with a note of supernatural insight. On Sunday, Jesus had sent two of the disciples into a village atop Mt. Olive, where, he told them, they would find a donkey colt on which no one had ever sat. Now foreseeing a donkey in an ancient village was no great feat, but for an untrained, unbroken colt, to be suddenly led away from its masters without any protest from the animal or its master, and then for the colt to be centerstage in a rollicking parade without bucking or stalling was against all nature, and yet it all transpired exactly as Jesus had foreseen it.

Tonight, Jesus sent Peter and John into the Jerusalem city gate with orders to follow a man with a water jar, this at the hour when everyone was busy on the sundown before Passover. The man would lead them to a house with a banquet room upstairs which the disciples were to secure in the name of The Teacher, at which point they would be led to a room already furnished with everything they'd need. Now it is just possible that Jesus had somehow prearranged both rendezvous's, but the story is told in Luke's gospel in such a way and with such detail that I don't think Jesus did. Rather, Luke tells these stories so as to show us Jesus marching toward his death in full possession of his prophetic powers. Really, the whole meal is unfolded by Jesus in a Spirit of prophecy.

He has *"deeply longed to eat this Passover"* with his apostles before he would *"suffer"*, Jesus said. The meal is charged with emotion for Jesus because it is their last Passover together *"till it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God."* In other words, that night was the last old Passover where blood on the doorframe would look forward to the day when God would provide real forgiveness to all humanity for all our sins, over and against that final Judgment for which old Passover was only a dress rehearsal.

So the first cup Jesus shared was the last cup Jesus or anyone else would drink in old Israel. He wouldn't touch wine again *"until the kingdom of God comes,"* he said. And at that moment Jesus moved past old Passover into what we have known ever since as the Lord's Supper, lifting the unleavened bread, flat bread without yeast, and calling it his body, human flesh with no sin, to be broken and given for us, Jesus said. Unblemished by sin himself, his body would *"given"* for the judgment that our sins deserve. And what old Passover looked forward to, the Lord's Supper would remember. So Jesus said, *"Do this in remembrance of me."*

"Likewise the cup after they had eaten" Luke goes on, Jesus lifted a cup and said, *"This cup, which is poured out for you, is the new covenant in my blood."* The next day, while Jesus was

being crucified, the priests were busy in the temple sacrificing Passover lambs whose blood once saved old Israel from an avenging angel in the days of Moses. But going forward, once Jesus died, people like you and me have lifted up a cup and remembered him, the true Lamb of God whose shed blood satisfied God's justice against all the bends and twists and lies and wrongs and betrayals and failures in our own characters. Bent and broken though we are, we can belong to God because we belong to Jesus, and he has borne what justice would have done to us without him.

It was a passing of the ages. It was the only night in redemptive history when old Passover and the Lord's Supper would exist as equals in the same room. And the disciples were caught in the torque of the change. Jesus continued in the Spirit of prophecy, *"But behold the hand of him who betrays me is with me on the table. The Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed!"* The passing of the ages is both a wonderful and a terrible thing. Jesus voice likely trembled at the prospect that one of his own had it in for his soul. And his disciples began to measure out loud who among them could be trusted, and who among them should be followed, who was bent and bad and wrong and who was great.

We noted some three years ago, on this night in this room, that David, being the Christ in his own day, was inspired to sing things about his own life in the psalms that would be fulfilled a thousand years later in the life of Jesus. So John's upper room story quoted Psalm 41 in which David had sung of being betrayed by *"my close friend whom I trusted, who ate my bread"* and John saw the whole business being repeated between Judas and Jesus. Here, Jesus in Luke's upper room story talks about *"the hand of him who betrays me"* being *"with me on the table"*, a turn of phrase that echoes David's singing of God *"preparing a table for me in the presence of my enemies."*

The point being that the passing of the ages from old Israel into the last days initiated a sort of invisible, intangible conflict in which good guys and bad guys would not be all that easy to tell apart. The very notion of treachery at the Communion table sent the apostles into a wrangling investigation in which they began to compare who was good and who was great and who was wrong, all based on what they could know and see and measure about each other. Only to have Jesus remind them that sight and sound and looks and strength and smarts was how the world measured people, how the nations built their kingdoms. *"But I am among you as the one who serves,"* Jesus told them.

I expect that Judas had made a discrete exit by this point, so Jesus keep on with prophecy, starting with the wonderful. *"And you are those who have stood by me in all my trials, and I confer on you, as my Father conferred on me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel."* My guess is that in his mind's eye Jesus is looking past the shabby, low rent, upper room where they actually were. And seeing the royal hall descended on the Last Day with the apostles at the head table, about to

take office and govern the new heavens and the new earth where God's people, "*the twelve tribes of Israel*" will live.

He knows who will betray him, and he knows that the rest of his guys are good. How? They have stood by him through all his trials. It's what Jesus asks! Not that we be heroes, not that we succeed at every turn, but that we stand by him, treat him as Lord, keep faith with him and with the people he's commanded us to love, our spouses and family and brothers and sisters at church. It's not the quantity of our performance, it's the intangibles. Who do we love, who are we there for, who do we trust and listen to. If it's Christ, he bear us through the failure that threaten to take us down.

Because life for believers in the Last Days, wonderful as it is to believe, can also be terrible. "*Simon, Simon,*" Jesus said, *Satan has asked for you to sift you like wheat.*" The point being that part of belonging to Jesus, part of being preserved through the Last Days and finding a seat in the royal hall is that we take up for ourselves the struggles and hardships that Jesus had to endure. Paul taught that with "*the power of his resurrection*" we must also accept "*the fellowship of his suffering, being conformed to his death*". The point being that Jesus wasn't going to be tried and abused and convicted and executed without someone from his disciples also taking a hit.

No accident it was going to be Peter. He had made up his mind he was with Jesus wherever Jesus was going that night. If you're Satan, Peter was a target the size of a great barn wall. Brave, loyal, overreactive, unstable. In the silly argument about who was best, no doubt Peter put in his card for greatness, and Satan was going to use it against him that night. But people, he failed because he was great. The other guys didn't fail because they didn't play. And Jesus knew Peter would fail and knew he would turn back again. Because Jesus was a prophet, he could see the intangibles.

And Jesus is a Savior, he had Peter's back in prayer, prayed for him, our passage tells us. Because it was not a given that Peter would turn back. Twenty two years of ministry, I can tell you, as often as not, they don't turn back when they fall that hard. But with grace on the table and God's Spirit in play, and Jesus pulling for us at the right hand of the Father, they can and often they do! But Christ's last word in Luke's upper room story is about how hard it will be.

In old Israel, following Jesus meant you never ran out of food, your boat never sank. Jesus once pulled the temple tax from the gut of a fish. And Jesus reminded his apostles about how good it was, how well he took care of them. But now, a new age was dawning in which the Son of Man could die on a cross, "*numbered*" Jesus said, "*among the transgressors.*" And if it could happen to him, it can happen to us.

So now, Jesus says, with life and death, cross and resurrection, Spirit and antichrist all in play all at once, it's a good idea to carry a purse and fill your rucksack, and, when it's necessary and warranted, buy a sword. Which is not to say that turning the other cheek, going the extra mile

and loving and praying for enemies is no longer a thing. It's just to say that, in the Last Days, life is complicated.

The world is still fallen. There will be enemies at the Communion table, some of them evil and unbelievers, others believers still finding their way, still thinking they're great and about to learn that they're not. And Jesus has called us to stand by him and each other through all the trials the world and the flesh and the devil can send our way. Because the intangibles we gain from keeping faith with him and from each other will more than make up for what we lose in the struggle. And in the morning comes heaven and glory, peace and happiness, feasting and fun. But to get there, we'll have to keep faith and wait for morning.