

+ Luke 22:14-20 + A Time for Giving Up the Old + Maundy Thursday + 28 March 2013 +

Something's different about tonight. Yes, the church looks the same as it has these past six weeks of Lent with the altar and pulpit and cross dressed in purple, but there's something different about tonight, something new. The sermon is at the beginning of tonight's service. That's different, but that's not it. This night has a unique name. That's different too, but that's not it either. The church season of Lent comes to an end tonight, but as a Jewish child would ask during the Passover meal, "Why does this night differ from all other nights?" What's so different about tonight?

Perhaps it has something to do with what's prepared beneath the white linens on the altar. Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that there is no blessing at the end of the service, because the service really continues tomorrow night and Sunday morning. Tonight is no ordinary midweek Lenten service, but something different, something new as the self-denial of this Lenten season comes to a close on this Maundy Thursday night. As Jesus begins something different, something new on this special night, he remind us that it's **TIME TO GIVE UP THE OLD** and celebrate the new.

"There's something different about tonight," the disciples thought to themselves as they reclined at the Passover table with Jesus. They had gathered in the upstairs room of a home in Jerusalem for this special meal that they had celebrated every year since early childhood. Jesus, their Lord and Teacher, had been leading them through the Passover Seder or order of service. It was the same Seder they had gone through since childhood. It was familiar. It was ancient, but something was different tonight.

For centuries on this night, the 14th day of Nisan, the Jews prepared a special, rather strange meal to recall how the Lord of hosts had graciously and miraculously rescued the Israelites from 400 years of slavery in Egypt. With plague after plague, the Lord had brought one of the greatest empires of the ancient world to its knees, but Pharaoh had remained hard-hearted and refused to let God's people go. So the Lord sent one last plague that would reduce Egypt to wailing. The firstborn son of every family in every home would die at the hands of the angel of death, but the Lord in his grace had a way of escape for his people. A year-old, male lamb without defect was to be slaughtered and its blood painted on the doorposts of every Israelite household. By the shedding of this blood, they would be saved. The angel of death would "pass over" the homes marked by the sacrifice of the lamb. For centuries thereafter, the succulent taste of roasted lamb, the rich flavor of wine, the sharp taste of bitter herbs, and the dry taste of unleavened bread would call to remembrance the great salvation God had won for his people, but tonight would be different.

Near the end of the Passover meal when the last of the unleavened bread was to be eaten, Jesus stepped away from the old order to make something new. **"He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.'"** In the same way after the main Passover supper, he took the final cup of blessing and said, **"This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you."** The old was gone, the new had come.

What had Jesus done that made this night so different from all others? Jesus did something new that had been prophesied 600 years before. With Jesus' unique words, the disciples would've recalled the Old Testament words of the prophet Jeremiah that we will hear later. **"The time is coming,' declares the Lord, 'when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah...I will be their God, and they will be my people...For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."** (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

That night the old way of things was passing away—the old covenant established on the condition that if people were to obey God's will perfectly, he would bless them and bring them to eternal life. Of course, with sin in the world and wickedness in every human heart, such a conditional covenant between God and humanity could never last. Adam and Eve had broken that covenant in the Garden of Eden. The Israelites broke that covenant before Moses had even brought God's holy written Law down from Mount Sinai. As for everyone else, including you and me, there's never been a time when we were not breaking that old covenant with God.

Sadly that same, old way of thinking just comes too naturally for every one of us. By nature, you and I fool ourselves into thinking, "If I just try hard enough, if I just be nice enough, if I just give of my money or my time or my effort, then God has to look at me and say there's no reason not to let me into heaven. At least I'm not as bad as the murderer or the rapist or the child molester or the dictator or the bigot or even the Wall Street big shot who lines his pockets with the money of little old ladies. Look at how much I've given up for God this Lent, sure it was only meat on Fridays and sweets, but it's the effort that counts." What a sad way of thinking that's as old as sin in our world and the sinful natures within us. Rather than please God, that old sinful way of

thinking only ends in destruction and death and hell. Anytime we try to make up with God on our own, it always ends in disaster whether messing up our lives in this life or ruining our eternity in hell.

...But tonight's different. You see, as we recall how Jesus did something new on this night, we find before us underneath those white linens on the altar a feast of forgiveness, and that's what's truly different about tonight. Yes, it's unleavened bread and wine as was used in the ancient Passover meals, but tonight is different, because that's no ordinary bread and wine that we'll receive later this evening. For in that feast of forgiveness we taste and touch and see the new covenant that Jesus established that first Maundy Thursday night in the upper room. This isn't a conditional covenant between God and mankind solely dependent on you and me keeping God's holy will. No, this covenant is based on what happens later on this special night and what will happen tomorrow and on Sunday morning.

This covenant is based on what Jesus did to carry out God's holy will after he left that upper room. It's based on what Jesus endured in the Garden of Gethsemane, where he was betrayed by one of his own and arrested by his enemies. It's based on what Jesus endured in the courts of the high priest, the Jewish council, and the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. It's based on the terrible suffering Jesus endured as he was beaten and mocked and spit on and blasphemed and flogged and finally crucified on a heavy cross he himself had to carry to the place of execution. It's based on the sacrifice of Christ's body on the cross and the shedding of his holy, precious blood to cleanse you of all those sins you've sought to give up this Lent—your materialism, your cowardly comfort, your false security, your self-righteousness, your arrogance, and your opposition.

Then wonder of wonders, Jesus gives you a feast of himself given and shed for you. He gives you his true body and his true blood in, with, and under the bread and the wine to ensure that you receive forgiveness and strength for your faith and assurance of eternal life. Jesus really gives you of himself so that in faith you can leave behind that old way of thinking and embrace the new covenant in his blood. Now you can joyfully share in the meal that accompanies that new covenant. With joy in your heart, you can eat and drink in this Holy Supper the salvation Jesus won for you on the cross. You can eat and drink the forgiveness of all your sins. You can eat and drink strength for your new life in Christ. That's why tonight is different. That is why tonight is so special compared to all other nights.

Tonight is different because tonight the old passes away and the new has come in our Savior Jesus. Tonight you find that newness in Christ at his table. Tonight at that table, you hear your gracious God tell you, "Your sins are forgiven, because my Son makes all things new for you. His blood has washed away your sins not because you pleased so much, but because I love you so much. His body was sacrificed on the cross so you might have freedom from sin and eternal life not because you have earned or deserved them, but because my Son earned them for you. Rejoice when you come to my table, when you hear those blessed words—'Take and eat. This is the true body of your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ given for you. Take and drink. This is the true blood of your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ shed for you.' Rejoice when you eat and drink the forgiveness he won for you and enjoy the new covenant he established between you and me. May my Holy Supper strengthen and preserve you in the true faith until life everlasting. Your sins are forgiven. Depart in the joy and peace of my forgiveness." Tonight is different. Amen.