

“Engaging in the Eucharist”

Mark 14:12-26; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Truly, the Eucharist (Holy Communion) is a holy mystery.



I’m often asked what heaven is like. My response is to suggest that the person look back to the very best moments or times of their life and then consider that being with Christ will be immeasurably more wonderful than even those good times. For me, as for many, those “best times” are wrapped around the people we love. In the Woody family, it is sitting around a table, everybody talking, eating – always good, but on occasion, something very special. In the fellowship and in the feasting, we are bound together, time stops, and our problems and anxieties fade away. Just think how often we choose to mark special occasions with a meal, a special meal, a meal that transcends mere nourishment, or even culinary pleasure. A meal that binds and makes us one – even if only for a brief while.

Knowing all this, it doesn’t surprise me that feasts play such a large in the life of God’s people. From Genesis to Revelation, feasts of one sort or another figure large in our life with God. They define us and shape us. And they begin with a ritual meal in the early spring that is called Passover. Here is the story of that meal.

The Exodus

When the book of Exodus opens, Abraham’s descendants (through Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob’s twelve sons) have been enslaved in Egypt for several hundred years. Sometime around 1500–1300 BC, Moses is born and then raised in the Pharaoh’s house. As a grown man, he murders an Egyptian who was beating a fellow Hebrew, and disappears into the desert. There, he marries and tends to his flocks.

One day, he sees a bush that is burning but is not consumed by the fire. When he investigates, Moses is confronted by God, who tells Moses that God is going to save the Hebrews. It is in this meeting that God reveals his name to Moses, YHWH, which means “I am” or “I am who I am” (Exodus 3:1-6).

Moses resists and offers up some reasons why he isn’t the right guy, but God persists. Eventually, Moses, with the help of his brother, returns to Egypt to confront the Pharaoh and demand freedom for the Hebrews. As you’d expect, the Pharaoh resists, so God sends plague after plague upon Egypt. In the end, Pharaoh relents only when God sends death to strike all the first-born of Egypt. However, the death passes over the homes of the Hebrews who have marked their doorways with the blood of a lamb.¹

After this final plague, Pharaoh lets the Hebrews go, but then changes his mind and chases after them. God parts the Red Sea (or “sea of reeds”) to let the Hebrews pass, but the Egyptian army is drowned when they follow the Hebrews into the parted waters.

The feast of Passover

In their commentary on the Passover, Ryken and Hughes share some valuable insights:

To make sure that his people would never forget their salvation, God gave them a special memory aid: Passover, or the Feast of Unleavened Bread. This feast was meant to be an annual celebration. . . .

The Israelites celebrated their first Passover in Egypt. They continued to celebrate it during the forty years they spent wandering in the wilderness (Num. 9:1–5). Once they entered the Promised Land, they still kept the feast, for God said, “When you enter the land that the LORD will give you as he

¹ Jews commemorate this “passing over” every spring. In the last week before his crucifixion, Jesus arrived in Jerusalem for the Passover celebration. The last supper of Jesus and his disciples was a Passover dinner; Jesus is the Passover lamb, essentially inaugurating a new Exodus. Jesus is the one whose sacrificial death makes our own salvation possible.

promised, observe this ceremony” (Exod. 12:25). No sooner had Joshua led the Israelites across the Jordan than they celebrated Passover in their new homeland (Josh. 5:10, 11).

Passover was an annual reminder of God’s saving grace, in which Israel’s deliverance from Egypt was commemorated and celebrated. The Exodus was not repeated, of course, but it was symbolically reenacted with blood and with bread. The feast that God’s people shared was something they could see, taste, touch, and smell. By reliving their escape from Egypt, they preserved the message of salvation in their collective memory. Passover was given so that future generations would know the salvation of their God.

In Exodus 12 the instructions for Passover are given twice, separated by instructions for the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Verses 1–13 concern the selection and slaughter of a perfect lamb. Once the lamb was slain, its blood was spread on the doorpost. The blood was a sign that a sacrifice had been made for sin, and thus it protected Israel’s firstborn sons from the angel of death. Finally, the lamb was roasted and eaten, together with bitter herbs and bread without yeast.²

The New Covenant

But the story of the Passover feast does not end there. Though the Israelites cherished God’s law and kept the stone tablets in the Ark of the Covenant, they proved unable to live as God had taught them. They proved unable to live in right relationship, truly loving God and loving neighbor.

Nonetheless, God, through the prophet Jeremiah, promised his people that the day would come when his law, his instruction to them, would no longer be written on the tablets of stone given to Moses, but on the very hearts of his people. God’s people would no longer even have to teach other about God, for they would all know God (Jeremiah 31:33-34). God would forgive their wickedness and not even remember their sin. This would be God’s new covenant with his people.

Which brings us to Jesus. Symbols can be emotionally powerful, sometimes enormously so. In his ministry, Jesus’ actions were often powerfully symbolic. He ate with the oppressed and despised to demonstrate that all persons were welcome in the coming of God’s kingdom. He healed the sick to demonstrate that in God’s kingdom the lame would walk and the blind would see. When Jesus came to Jerusalem for Passover Festival in the days before his death, he went to the temple overturning tables and invoking, in words and action, Jeremiah’s judgment on the temple system. In sharing the Passover meal with his disciples, Jesus would reshape cherished Jewish symbols and hopes, applying them to himself and his ministry.

Jesus had come to Jerusalem a few days before, entering the city as a returning king, to waving palms and chanting crowds. Because of the large crowds in Jerusalem³ for festival, Jesus and his disciple had stayed in Bethany, a “suburb.” Now, after sundown on Thursday, the evening of his arrest and trial, Jesus gathered his disciples together so they could share the Passover meal within the city walls.

The Passover meal was eaten by a family. On that early spring evening in Jerusalem, Jesus and the twelve disciples make up the family. The head of the household would offer thanks for the “bread of affliction,”⁴ (Deuteronomy 16:3). Now, Jesus identifies the bread with himself – with his suffering for his disciples. The Passover lamb was the seal of the covenant between God and his people, a covenant that had been written on tablets of stone. Now, Jesus reminds his disciples of the new covenant, to be written on hearts, which had been promised centuries before in the scroll of Jeremiah. Jesus is the “mediator of a better covenant . . . enacted through better promises” (Hebrew 8:6), a covenant sealed with Jesus’ own blood. Is it any wonder that early Christians came to embrace the sacredness of the Lord’s Supper?

² Ryken, P. G., & Hughes, R. K. (2005). *Exodus: saved for God’s glory* (pp. 336–337). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

³ The population of Jerusalem was about 60,000 in Jesus’ day, but could swell to nearly 200,000 during major festivals.

⁴ God instructed the Israelites to use unleavened bread at Passover to remind them of their hasty departure from Egypt. Unleavened bread is bread made without yeast. It takes time for yeast to do its magic, making the bread rise.

And so we share this feast of the new covenant, this reshaping of the Passover meal around our Lord. As John the Baptist exclaimed, “Behold! The lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

The Eucharistic⁵ tradition begins

The earliest record of the communion meal is not from the gospels, rather, it is Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, written in AD 53 or so, a decade before Mark. There are lots of problems with the communion meal in Corinth; for one, the rich are eating all their food in private and leaving little for the poor among them. Paul seeks to help them understand the meaning of this holy meal. Richard Hays writes:

Thus, in Paul’s rendering of the tradition, two closely linked themes stand out: the sharing of the Supper calls the community to think of Jesus’ death for others, and that death is understood to initiate a new covenant (v. 25; cf. Jer. 31:31–34). To be in covenant relation with God is to belong to a covenant people bound together by responsibilities to God and to one another; the character of this new covenant should be shown forth in the sharing of the meal. The trouble with the Corinthians is that they are celebrating the Supper in a way that disregards this structure of covenant obligations and demonstrates an odd amnesia about Jesus’ death. By showing contempt for those who have nothing, they are acting as though his death had not decisively changed the conditions of their relationship to one another.⁶

We are people of this new covenant. God has put within us a new heart and a new Spirit (Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:26). We may not always feel this way or act like it, but we are not alone. God is with us. Jesus has ushered in the new covenant foreseen centuries before by Jeremiah.

The community of New Covenant People

Who are we? We are people of this new covenant. We, those who make up the body of Christ, are a covenantal community, bound by covenant to God and to one another. In Paul’s words, we have all been reconciled . . . as one body . . . to God by the cross and God is building us into a place where God lives through the Spirit (Ephesians 2:16, 22).

This “people-oriented” agreement God has made with us means that, as Bishop N. T. Wright writes, “it is as impossible, unnecessary, and undesirable to be a Christian all by yourself as it is to be a newborn baby all by yourself,” for all those who have faith in Christ are born anew, new creations born into God’s creation, the Church. As another wise and informed Christian, whose name escapes me, wrote, “There is no healthy relationship with Jesus without a relationship to the Church.” To put it another way, we can’t expect to have a healthy relationship with Jesus without a relationship with his Body. And to put a finer edge on the theology, all believers are part of the Body of Christ, whether they are present or absent.

Humans are built for relationships, for community. We are made in the image of God, who, in his very being, is inherently relational, an eternal loving fellowship of three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus, it is in covenantal community with one another, believer to believer, that we discover the best within us and learn what it really means to be God’s people.

The bridge across our differences

Christians are all over the place when it comes to Holy Communion. We all (or at least, most) affirm that it is breathtakingly significant. But ask “what is really happening?” and you’ll get a lot of answers. Scripture doesn’t help much here. What exactly did Jesus mean when he said, “This is my body . . . this is my blood?” or “Do this in remembrance of me.” The disciples were perplexed and so are we.

In keeping with John Wesley, Methodists are theologians of the middle. We are a bridging church. This reflects our roots in the Church of England, which, during the Protestant reformation, sought to hold together those

⁵ “Eucharist” comes from the Greek, *eucharistia*, meaning “thanksgiving.” A key part of our Communion liturgy is called the “Great Thanksgiving.”

⁶ Hays, R. B. (1997). *First Corinthians* (p. 199). Louisville, KY: John Knox Press.

who wanted to stay with Rome and those who sought a return to “primitive” Christianity (the Puritans, for example). We see this Methodist (and Anglican) commitment to finding the middle way, the *via media*, in many areas of Christian doctrine and practice, including our understanding of Holy Communion.⁷ Since we are searching for the middle way, let’s look at the two extremes.

Rome and Zwingli

In the Roman Catholic view of Communion, by consecrating the elements (the bread and wine), they become the body and blood of Christ. For a Catholic, when Jesus said, “This is my body,” he meant just that. But many Protestant reformers challenged that understanding. One, Huldrych Zwingli, held that the Lord’s Supper is merely a symbolic meal, a recalling or memorial of the Last Supper. Remembrance, then, becomes no more than recollection. Many Baptist and similar denominations hold this Zwinglian view.

You can see how these differing views would lead to very different practices. Daily Mass by Roman Catholics is understandable since they believe the Mass makes Christ physically present. Likewise, if Communion is no more than symbolic recalling, then one might practice Communion infrequently.

The Real Presence of Christ

In our striving to find the middle way, Methodists embrace that Jesus Christ is really present at Communion, in a way that he is not otherwise, but we do not try to explain exactly how we experience Christ’s presence. We hold that “in remembrance” is far more than a symbolic recalling of Jesus’ death; it is the dynamic re-presentation of the living Christ. This is from “This Holy Mystery,” a UMC paper on Communion:

“United Methodists, along with other Christian traditions, have tried to provide clear and faithful interpretations of Christ’s presence in the Holy Meal. Our tradition asserts the real, personal, living presence of Jesus Christ. For United Methodists, the Lord’s Supper is anchored in the life of the historical Jesus of Nazareth but is not primarily a remembrance or memorial. We do not embrace the medieval doctrine of transubstantiation, though we do believe that the elements are essential tangible means through which God works. We understand the divine presence in temporal and relational terms. In the Holy Meal of the church, the past, present, and future of the living Christ come together by the power of the Holy Spirit so that we may receive and embody Jesus Christ as God’s saving gift for the whole world.” [Underlining added]

Past, present, and future

When we come to the Lord’s table, we are stepping out of our own time and into God’s time. The past and the future come rushing to meet us. Think of it as living on heaven’s clock. The Jews grasped this. Each year at Passover, the father would gather the family together over the Passover meal, saying “This is the night when our God, the Holy One, blessed be he, came down to Egypt and rescued us from the Egyptians . . .” Of course, it wasn’t the night – at least not as we reckon time. But it was the night in God’s time. The family was one with their ancestors during that meal. They were the same family being rescued in an eternal act of salvation.

In the same way, when we come forward to partake of Holy Communion, we are with Christ, with the disciples, and with all the people of God. God’s future, his victory over sin and death, comes rushing to meet us over the Lord’s table. It all takes a lot of imagination, doesn’t it. And it takes all of us, at one table, as one family. Truly, we are all one in Christ Jesus!

A final burst of imagination: The marriage supper of the Lamb

We often make the mistake of thinking of time as only linear. But we live post-Einstein. According to his theories, which have been borne out, time passes more slowly for an astronaut circling the earth at high speed than it does for us on the ground. The astronaut’s “after” is my “before.” If the astronaut’s “before” and my “before” aren’t the same, why should I assume that “before” and “after” have any fixed meaning with God?

⁷ This is way too big a topic for this short study. For more, you might read “This Holy Mystery: A UMC Understanding of Holy Communion,” which was adopted by the General Conference in 2004. It can easily be found on-line.

We struggle to make sense of the New Testament's perspective that God's kingdom has come already, but not yet. We struggle to grasp that the people of God are not just waiting to be the bride but are already the bride. In the glorious images of Revelation 21, God comes to dwell with his people. And yet God dwells already with his people. We are God's temple. The Holy Spirit is God dwelling amongst us.

All this takes a massive feat of imagination, and Revelation is written for the imagination. John's visions are meant to help us imagine the truth of a larger reality than we see and touch in our daily lives.

I say all this to help us grasp the significance of Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper. When we partake in this communal meal, not only do we pull the Passover and its sacrificial lamb forward to this day, but we also pull the marriage supper of the Lamb and the bride back to this time. (There I go thinking linearly again, but it really can't be helped, it's how we are.) In Holy Communion, we step out of our time and into God's time, for, blessedly, we have all been invited to this meal.