

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lena, IL – 6 April 2023**  
**Maundy Thursday - Year A**

**1st Reading: *Exodus 12:1-14***

**Psalm: *116:1-2, 12-19***

**2nd Reading: *I Corinthians 11:23-26***

**Gospel: *John 13:1-17, 31b-35***

**Sermon - *Vicar Thomas J. Mosbø***

In the name of the Father, ✠ and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Why is this night different from all other nights? Now there's an intriguing question. And it is one that was asked last night by millions of children around the world. In fact, it was asked four different times by those children.

Last evening was the beginning of Passover, so as the sun was setting around the world Jewish families began their Passover meal, and the little ritual that goes along with it, called the Haggadah, the Story: the story of the Exodus, which since Medieval times has included the four questions, asked by the youngest child present who is able, and which all begin with the words "Why is this night different from all other nights?"

This Passover ritual has grown a bit over the centuries, but in its basic form it is the same meal that Jesus shared with his disciples on the night before his death, the night (as Paul words it) in which he was betrayed.

Our family has hosted a Passover meal each of the past 40 or so years, on the night of the Jewish Passover, sometimes with just our family, sometimes with a number of guests. And our Haggadah, our Story, includes how Jesus fulfills the Passover. It is one of the highlights of our year, with the smells of unleavened bread baking in the oven, and listening to the music of a Jewish Christian folk-rock band named Lamb.

Last year was the first time in those 40 some years that the evening of the Passover meal landed exactly on Maundy Thursday. This year, it fell on just the night before, and we did celebrate it with our two daughters' families in Janesville last night.

We as Christians celebrate Easter on the first Sunday after the Full Moon that occurs on or after the spring equinox. This was all worked out by the Venerable Bede, whose tomb lies in our beloved Durham Cathedral in the north of England. And if we count back three days from Easter, we have Maundy Thursday, the day on which Jesus celebrated his last Passover meal. But the date of Passover itself is calculated a little differently, and has been for several thousand years - it is the first Full Moon after the first *New Moon* on or after the spring equinox, so it usually falls during Holy Week, but can come a month later. But it always, always falls on the night of a full moon. If you noticed, there was indeed a Full Moon last night. [I may quiz you all about this at a later date.]

So, as I said, we as Christians acknowledge that Jesus fulfills the Passover, but just how does he do this? We heard in our reading from Exodus this evening how the Passover meal was instituted by God through Moses. Moses, of course, had been sent by God to lead the Israelites out of the slavery in Egypt and bring them to the promised land. But Pharaoh would have none of it, and kept refusing to let God's people go. So God sent a series of nine plagues against the Egyptians, like water turned to blood, the death of cattle, swarming locusts, and darkness. But even though the entire nation of Egypt was ruined through these plagues, Pharaoh kept changing his mind and still refused Moses' demands.

So God was going to send one final plague. The firstborn of every family in Egypt would die. But how would the angel of death know which houses belonged to the Israelites so that none of their children would die? God told each family to kill a lamb and mark their doorposts with its blood. Then that lamb would be eaten as part of the Passover meal. So when the angel of death came that night, it would pass over each house that had lamb's blood on its doorposts and no one in that household would die.

That very night, after Pharaoh's own son died, Moses did lead the people of Israel out of their slavery in Egypt. But Pharaoh changed his mind yet again, and followed after them to recapture them and return them to slavery. Then God performed one of his greatest miracles ever. He divided the sea so that there was dry land for the Israelites to cross, but when the Egyptians tried to follow them, the sea rushed back and drowned them all. God had saved his people, set them free from their slavery, and began to lead them to the promised land, flowing with milk and honey.

Some 1200 years later, God became man as Jesus Christ. And Jesus, not by lamb's blood, but by his own; not by killing his enemy's eldest son, but by dying himself, the only Son of God, has now saved his people forever, set us free from our slavery from sin, and will bring us to the true promised land forever at the resurrection.

So the whole purpose of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, was to perform a new miracle, a new Exodus. If you remember our Gospel reading on the Sunday just before Lent, at the Transfiguration, the disciples saw Jesus speaking with Moses himself, and with Elijah, who appeared in glory with Jesus and spoke of his Exodus, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

Now the time had come. The evening of the Passover meal had arrived, and in Luke's Gospel Jesus specifically tells his disciples, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer." Now, Luke, the only Gentile author of the New Testament, filled in more details about Jesus' "exodus" and his last Passover meal than the Jewish authors of the other Gospels, probably because he wanted to explain a little more to his non-Jewish readers than the Jewish readers of Matthew and John would need, and so we did not hear in John's Gospel this evening about Jesus instituting the sacrament of Holy Communion, although we did read about it in Paul's letter to the Corinthians.

At the Passover celebration in Jesus' day, those gathered would have drunk three cups of wine, but the one before the meal, and the one just after the meal, which is the one Paul mentions, were the most important. When that first cup is drunk, the leader blesses the Lord, our God, king of the universe, the creator of the fruit of the vine. Baruch atah, Adonai, Eloheanu, Melekh ha-olam, bore peri hag-gafen.

The reading in Exodus tells us that the lamb is to be eaten with unleavened bread, so after this cup, a loaf of unleavened bread was broken with a similar blessing: Blessed are you, O Lord, our God, king of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth: Baruch atah, Adonai, Eloheanu, Melekh ha-olam, ham-mutzi lechem min ha-aretz. This remains the table prayer of most Jews to this day, and our family is very familiar with it.

And here Jesus turns from the ancient Exodus to his own. This bread, he says, is my body, given for you, just as the lamb who died for the Passover was given for you. I am the new sacrifice, once for all time, who takes away the sin of the world.

And then once the meal was over, Jesus took the main cup of blessing, but instead of thanking God for his past miracles for his people, Jesus says, "This is my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin. Do this for the remembrance of me." Paul explains this and says "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

So why is this night different from all other nights? It is the night when Jesus gave himself up to the powers of darkness to defeat death, sin, and the devil, to save us all, when God gave himself for us.

Through this Passover meal, then, through the sacrament of holy communion, whenever we eat and drink it, we are present with the disciples at the last supper, we are present even moreso with Jesus after that supper as he goes to dark Gethsemane to pray, then suffers on the cross, giving his broken body and flowing blood for our salvation. And we await the final fulfillment of *our* Haggadah, our story, when Jesus comes back to raise us all to eternal life.

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus

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