

Maundy Thursday**Exodus 24:3-11****1 Cor. 10:16-17 (18-21)****Mark 14:12-26**

Twentieth century Lutheranism has seen a marked recovery in Eucharistic observance. While the salutary emphasis on the forgiveness of sins has been maintained, our churches have emphasized the corporate aspects of the Sacrament as well. As we go to the supper, we are united to one another and to all other Christians throughout the world; we share in one loaf, one cup. The Lord's Supper is also once again seen as an eschatological meal. God's end-time goodness in the Bible is often portrayed as a lavish victory banquet. Our eating and drinking in church is an anticipation of that great banquet. Despite the troubles and worries that swirl all around us, we lay hold right now on God's final victory. Consequently joy is another mark of recent Communion, a joy that expresses itself in thanksgiving. Finally, Communion is seen as a great affirmation of Creation and of things material. In the everyday stuff of bread and wine — products of God's hand and human technology, God comes to meet us. Bread stands for full stomachs AND world hunger; wine is part and parcel of our highest joy and, through drunkenness, of our folly. There — in our want and plenty, joy and folly — we receive Jesus Christ.

The Old Testament lesson describes the covenant ceremony on Sinai and offers opportunities for fresh understanding of the Eucharist.

Moses told the people all the words of the Lord and his ordinances (v. 3). In the context, "words" relates to the Decalogue and "ordinances" to the so-called Covenant Code (chapters 21-23). A relationship to God includes responsibility and obedience, and the people back then pledged themselves to total commitment: "All the words which the Lord has spoken we will do." The word "Maundy" comes from *mandatum*; it refers to the new commandment (to love one another) which Jesus gave after washing the disciples' feet (John 13:34). By coming to the altar for Communion, people are dedicating their lives to the doing of God's will.

A second insight from Exodus 24 involves the blood of the covenant. Moses takes sacrificial blood and throws half of it on the altar and half of it on the people! He declares: "Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you." The Bible does not tell us the exact significance of this rite. Some have seen it as a threat of punishment. The blood on the altar then would indicate that God would be under a curse if he would violate his promise. A similar self-imprecation is in Gen. 15:17ff.

The blood on the people would indicate that they too stood in danger of the curse for breach of covenant. In the events of Holy Week, we see Jesus take upon himself the curse. God did not violate his promise, but he, nevertheless, underwent the curse of broken covenant. That death we remember in the Lord's supper.

The blood of Exodus 24 may also symbolize participation and fellowship at the deepest level. Since life is in the blood, and since both the people and God (via the altar) share in one batch of blood, their lives are intricately linked. A similar emphasis appears in 1 Cor. 10:16-17. Finally, blood here may have purificatory implications. Without shedding of blood there is no remission!

A third scene in Exodus 24 seems appropriate for eucharistic theology. The chief men of the people of Israel beheld God and ate and drank. While ordinarily people could not see God and live (Ex. 33:20), the Israelite leaders could survive this sight in the context of covenant making. How different this passage seems from the terror caused

by God's presence in Exodus 19. Covenants in Old Testament times were ratified by a meal (cf. Gen. 26:30, 31:46, 54; Deut. 27:7, Ex. 18:12). Here is another facet usable for eucharistic theology. Eating and drinking with God celebrates and observes the covenant God has forged through his Son. Such a ritual reminds us of our debt to Israel's faith and of the many and various ways the traditions of the Old Testament are refracted in the New.

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Good Friday
Isaiah 52:13-53:12
Hebrews 4:14-5:10
John 18:1-19:42

Lutheran preaching is so cross centered that we are taxed to the utmost on Good Friday to plumb the profound character of this day and its events. The reading from John is 82 verses long, from Hebrews 13, from (Second) Isaiah 15. Instead of hurrying through these readings or shortening them, perhaps they should be read slowly (and with much rehearsal). Commentary might be limited to hymns, prayers, or instrumental music. Read well, these lessons might function, at least in one year, without a sermon.

But the lessons are also extremely provocative for the homiletics buff. At times people are distraught by contemporary understandings of the Fourth Servant Poem, fearing that its old, rich meaning will be lost. The notes below offer a counter suggestion: perhaps new insights and applications are possible.

The identity of the original Servant is hotly debated, but the majority opinion centers on Israel as a people. Chapters 40-55 of Isaiah promise Israel an early end to Babylonian exile, a new creation, a triumphic return to Palestine. The promised reversal is so total that the ancient audience might have succumbed to a theology of glory that would trust in God for selfish reasons and that would be unprepared for the hard knocks of history.

Second Isaiah meets this challenge by holding up for Israel a vocation as suffering servant. As they absorb the pain of exile and the taunts of their captors (cf. Ps. 137), they are urged to maintain absolute trust in God and in His

final vindication. As a nation they might seem ugly and unattractive, small in size and unsuccessful in war, but yet God made them shoot up unexpectedly like a root out of dry ground (53:2). The nations and kings of the world were utterly surprised — they had judged Israel by its gross national product, number of divisions, and frustrating history. Yet that nation was the object of God's pleasure.

Even more: although the nations had considered Israel to be under God's judgment in exile (v. 3), they suddenly saw the real significance of Israel's misfortune: God was visiting on this faithful servant the punishments due the nations of the world. Israel is suffering for our offenses (v. 5). That realization triggered confession of sins among the nations of the world (v. 6). Israel, though relatively innocent, is stricken by God and shares a shameful death with the outcasts of the world (v. 9). It does this for the nations.

Nevertheless, suffering Israel can count on final vindication. Long life and many descendants are promised and are sure. As it waits for the exile of exile, Israel is called to patient, hopeful expectation. God never forsakes his friend. You can count on his Word (40: 8; 55:10-11).

That magnificent vocation could never fully be plumbed by any nation. But that final Israelite, Jesus of Nazareth, made that vocation his own. Nations and kings might scorn him, but he addressed the Father from the cross as "My God, My God." Puzzled by the Father's abandoning him ("why have you forsaken me?"), he committed his spirit to the Father's own hands in death. And such faith did not go unanswered. On Easter Sunday God raised him from the dead to a victory that far transcends length of life and abundance of children. God's plan for the world remained constant from Second Isaiah to the first Good Friday. Jesus carried out the job assigned to Israel and to us — and much, much more!

Still Is. 52: 13-53: 12 speaks of us. What Israel could not do, and what Jesus did, is now promised to us. We are invited to be God's servants, trusting him despite the buffeting of life. And that invitation can be accepted — and lived out — because of the empowering achieved on

that Servant's Cross. Our vindication is already past history, and yet the ultimate consummation is still to come. The nations of the world are to know that Jesus carried their burden, but that becomes understandable to them sometimes only when they see the Church's servant shape today.

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