

Maundy Thursday 2016 Luke 22:7-20

Food for the Journey

What is this supper that is set before us tonight? It is the body and blood of Christ, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. It is strength and nourishment for life. It is remembering the past. It is food for the journey today. It is an anticipation the future and a foretaste of the feast to come. The hymn we just sang helps to set our theme for tonight. It talks about our weakness and weariness. It uses words like restless and heavy laden. It paints us a picture of the spiritual hunger that is with us every day.

We have deep inner needs of the heart and soul. To get a clearer picture, I want to go back to the Old Testament, to the time of the Old Covenant and the Passover because they set the stage for this New Covenant and the New Passover which we celebrate tonight. As Jesus gave this holy supper to his disciples, it was in the midst of the Passover. It was a time for God's people to remember the weakness and weariness they experienced in Egypt. They were slaves. They carried an ever increasing burden. They were oppressed, hungry, and restless, wondering where God was and when He would come to their rescue and deliver them. The waiting seemed to go on and on forever. They started to believe that the Lord had forgotten them . . . He's not coming . . . He said He would, but He's not coming.

As much as it seemed like it, God had not forgotten His people. He raised up Moses to go to Pharaoh and deliver the people from their slavery, their oppression, and their weariness and weakness. "*Set God's people free,*" Moses said to Pharaoh but Pharaoh refused. Cheap labour was hard to come by. First came one plague, then another, to give Pharaoh an opportunity to change his heart and mind. When he refused and hardened his heart, more plagues came, hunger, sickness, darkness, and finally death. One night the angel of death came to claim the firstborn of everything. To be spared a visit by this angel, the Israelites were given special instructions. Take a lamb without blemish and sacrifice it. Put some of its blood on the door posts of your house, then roast the lamb whole and eat it along with unleavened bread. Eat this meal quickly with your travelling clothes on, ready at a moment's notice for a quick departure. When God's deliverance comes, it will be quick.

In each and every step, the Israelites were to act on God's word and promise. They were to dare to trust that He would deliver them. They were delivered that night. The Old Testament Passover was their last meal in Egypt. They ate it in haste along with the unleavened bread. They ate the flesh of that which saved them, the Passover lamb. That night they were delivered from the judgment of God. The blood of the Passover lamb saved them from the wrath of God. They were set free and God started them on the way to the promised land. Their burdens and oppression were lifted but that meal was not just a meal of deliverance, it was food for the journey ahead. It was to strengthen them for the days and months and years to come. Every year they would celebrate this Passover as a memorial of what God had done to set them free. The anniversary of this day would be their celebration of a new year, and from one generation to the next, they were to pass on what God had done to deliver them. It was a day to remember the past grace of God that had set them free. It was also a day to remember the present grace of God, grace that would be with them on the journey. And it was a day to anticipate the future grace of God that would finally bring them home.

Think about what lie ahead for the Israelites. They were not home free yet. They had hardly finished celebrating their escape from Egypt when they arrived at the shores of the Red Sea. God had directed them that way, because it was supposed to be easier. They looked back and Pharaoh's army was in hot pursuit. Their hearts melted and fear erupted in them. They began to doubt the purpose of God and the promises of God. They doubted the power of God. They doubted the love and grace of God but God protected them. His pillar of cloud went between them and their enemy and kept them safe all through the night. God led them through the midst of the Red Sea and afterward destroyed Pharaoh and his army. Many times in the wilderness, on their journey to the promised land, temptation would get the better of them. Many times they would wish themselves back in Egypt. Fear would overtake them and they would doubt the promises of God. They were, as another hymn suggests, tossed about with many a conflict, many a doubt, fightings and fears within, without.

When you read on in the Old Testament, you see the grace of God again and again throughout that wilderness journey. God fed them with the bread of heaven. He sustained them, fed them, and protected them. He led them. He was with them. That's why the Passover was not just a celebration of the past but it was the present experience of God with them in the here and now. It is in that context that we need to look at our text tonight. Why did Jesus so desire to eat this Passover with His disciples? He knew what was ahead for them. The night to come and the days to follow would

be difficult. They would be weary with lack of sleep. It would be hard for them to stay focused in the garden of Gethsemane. They would deny Jesus, betray Him, run and hide. They would be scattered. The next days would shake the very foundations of their lives. This supper that they would have with Jesus was very practical. It would be food for the journey, spiritual sustenance for the days ahead.

What can we learn from this? The disciples would be afraid that night. How do you deal with fear? They would be filled with doubt and worry. What is God's prescription for you in the midst of doubt and worry? They would be burdened under a load of guilt. Is there a tonic for our guilt? Is there a way for us to taste anew the sweetness of the forgiveness of sins? This Lord's Supper meal brings a holy medicine for us. Our Lord Jesus invites us to draw near to God with hearts sprinkled clean. Jesus is our great high priest, who has opened the way to heaven for all who follow after Him. In this holy meal we are brought back into fellowship with God. The real enemy, the one who holds God's people in bondage is the devil. The spotless Lamb is Jesus. The doorposts are two pieces of wood nailed into the shape of a cross. The eating would be the same. We are invited to eat the Lamb, and to drink the cup of salvation. The bread and wine are no loner just bread and wine. The body and blood of the Lamb are here together with the bread and wine. As we eat His body and drink His blood we remember the past and how God delivered us from sin and death. We take hold of the present reality that Jesus is with us now to rescue us from our weakness, our weariness, and our restlessness. It is for us a heavenly meal to sustain us on the journey through this life to the promised land of heaven.

Think about the journey through this life and all the dangers that oppose us. One lies in a hospice bed, clinging to life here and yet longing for the life to come. Each breath is work. Medications take the edge off the pain but it's still there, nagging away in the background. Another sits by his bedside, praying in one breath that the Lord would take him home soon, and in the next breath praying for another day, even another hour. What could possibly have the power to sustain faith in the midst of such a journey? Only Jesus' words of promise can strengthen and preserve. Only Jesus' presence with His body and blood can uphold and feed us in those hours. Here we are, this side of heaven, tossed about, with many a conflict, many a doubt ... fightings and fears within, without. Someone struggles with home and family and marriage difficulties. The road seems endless. If it were just one problem, they could face it but the problems have multiplied one upon another until the load is too heavy to carry. The light that's supposed to be at the end of the tunnel is an oncoming train.

In case you didn't know it, the devil doesn't fight fair. There are many times when God's promise that He will not allow us to be tempted beyond our strength seems to be just another hollow cliché and we need real strength for the journey. Where can we go for help to sustain our faith on such journeys through this life? There is no earthly answer to this heavenly question. But there is an answer. What the disciples would face that Passover night and in the days ahead would require a heavenly answer and a heavenly cure. And Jesus gave them one ... this is my body ... this is my blood ... given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. This Lord's Supper is spiritual food for our journey. It is for the deep, inner needs of our hearts and souls.

Life this side of heaven is filled with struggles against sin and Satan. This side of heaven, we are called to live beyond our sinful nature. This side of heaven, we await the new and final deliverance of eternity. We need what this holy supper has to give us. In the midst of all our needs, our Lord Jesus is here with His body and blood in the bread and wine to relieve our weariness and give us strength for the journey. Sometimes people ask me, "How often should I come to the Lord's Supper?" I suggest that they consider what this sacrament is for. It is given for the strengthening of faith. It is given to assure us again of the forgiveness of our sins. Think about the seriousness of your sins and the need to hear and receive forgiveness again and again. This holy meal is given as a way to proclaim forgiveness to our weary hearts and, as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

Do you come to this holy supper often? If not, why not? Any doctor can tell you that a loss of appetite is generally considered a symptom of bodily illness. If you are one who has lost the appetite for the Lord's Supper and feel no need for the strength and forgiveness it offers, then it's time for you to take a good, long look. How many times "often" is, is not a question of arithmetic. Don't ask "When did I last come?" Rather ask yourself, "Am I a sinner? Do I need my faith strengthened to face life tomorrow? Are there bumps in the road on the journey of life?" Some want to say there's a danger that our frequency might destroy the sacredness of the Lord's Supper that it would become too familiar and we would grow tired of it.

The power of the Word of God doesn't diminish if we hear it often. Its treasure is inexhaustible but we do need to make adequate spiritual preparation. It is the thoughtless use of the Lord's Supper that misses the blessing. Truth is, as we experience the strengthening of faith which follows the assurance of forgiveness in this holy supper, our appreciation for it as a source of strength will increase as we use it. Lord, I feel weak tonight, weak in faith. I faint at the shadow of the cross looming large tomorrow. I faint at the thought that it was my sins that put You there. Lord, I desire Your forgiveness and spiritual aid, for my sins oppress me. Dare I hope for Your forgiveness? To your troubled heart Jesus says, "Come." Lord, I long for your grace, but I have no joyful feeling in my heart and I think I am not fit to come. Doubt wells up in you. To your doubting heart Jesus says, "Come." Lord, I hunger and thirst after Your righteousness and peace but I have offended You so often. I must be unworthy. To your thirsty heart Jesus says, "Come."

Such desiring and longing, such hungering and thirsting after forgiveness and grace from God is the essence of faith. Faith is a Spirit inspired longing for God. It is not measured by your feelings. It is not measured by the size of your sins. Faith is daring to come to God with your need and clinging to His promises. Where there is trust in God's promise there is faith. And the person is worthy and well prepared who has faith in the promise . . . *given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins.*