

April 17, 2025

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Psalm 116:12-19 & 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Remembering the Wilderness

Our New Testament scripture this evening is the passage from which the Words of Institution we say as we break the bread and pour the cup are derived. Hear now the instructions the Apostle Paul gives to the gathered church in Corinth.

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. **The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

"Do this in remembrance of me." "Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." Looking back on the night, it seems a bit funny that those words "in remembrance of me" are the ones that so many people remember. That so many people lift up and say over and over again. That are carved into the wood of tables where the feast is shared.

It is funny in an ironic kind of way because on that night other words of Jesus still echo in my head. Jesus had told us that he eagerly desired to eat this Passover meal with us before he suffered. That he would not eat this meal again until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God. That struck a chord with me. This would be our last Passover supper together. And what did he mean by this meal would be fulfilled in the kingdom of God? Did he mean that our freedom and deliverance would be complete?

It reminded me of the psalm of thanksgiving and praise we pray together towards the end of Passover when we thank God for God's mercy and for rescuing us from enslavement and our safe exodus from Egypt.

What shall I return to the LORD for all God's bounty to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD. I will offer to God a thanksgiving sacrifice and call on the name of the LORD.

Later in the meal Jesus spoke words that chilled me to bone. He said, "But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table. For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!" We looked around incredulously at each other - one of us betray him. Betray Jesus. Woe to him is an understatement. There is no way one of us who have walked with him these past three years could betray him. We have been through so much together since Jesus called us from our fishing nets and told us we would be fishers of people. You see we had become a community

– a family really – as we were traveling with Jesus through Galilee and then to Jerusalem. We were with him night and day as he taught us and the crowds what it meant to love God and love your neighbor; we were with him when he healed the sick, the ones who couldn't see or couldn't hear and the ones who were unclean. There were so many, so many who were now restored and had rejoined the community. We saw with our own eyes this healing and restoration. No way one of us would betray him.

We ate so many meals together. Many were simple, sitting under a tree or by the lake, with some shade and breeze so we could nap before we resumed our trek. So many people invited us into their homes for a meal - sharing a little of what they had with us. And Jesus was always inviting people he met along the way to dine with us. And I don't just mean the officials and leaders, the movers and shakers and A-list celebrities. No Jesus invited those who couldn't repay with a like invitation; the ones people thought were nobodies and worse, the ones people thought were less than the nobodies, the homeless, tax collectors and prostitutes; the sinners one and all. Again and again Jesus invited them all to come dine with us at the table.

I actually enjoyed these meals more than the fancy banquets we occasionally attended. I felt pretty out of place at those. You would think that Jesus would have too. He came from a humble background in Nazareth - Nazareth! Yet Jesus relished the opportunity to share words of love and peace and grace and mercy with the rich and powerful, even if they didn't always appreciate what he had to say as much as we did. And then there was time Jesus had been teaching and healing all day - crowds and crowds of people. The day was drawing late and we realized we didn't have enough food - really any food, just five loaves and two fish - for all those gathered. We wanted to send everyone home or to the closest village. Not Jesus. He took the loaves of bread and the fish and he raised them up to heaven, blessing them. He broke them and gave them to us to feed the crowds. And all were fed. Everyone - I mean everyone - was fed. And there were even leftovers.

All of that time breaking bread together. No way one of us would betray him.

We were with Jesus as he rode into Jerusalem with the shouts of Hosanna echoing in our ears. What an experience that was - yes it was a parade. And yet, it was more. The crowds were dizzying in their shouts for a king and we joined in "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord. Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven."

And yes, we were with him through the wilderness times. I think that is why I had a hard time believing that one of us would betray him. We had been through some really difficult times. The times when he challenged the authorities who took the letter of the law more seriously than the spirit of the law. The times when we would look around and see the great needs that surrounded us. And feel helpless. Like the small actions we were doing would never amount to much because the systems that were holding the people down – preventing them from

earning a fare wage, or having a little piece of land to call their own, or getting the care they needed be healthy and whole – were just too big and powerful for us to matter. Jesus would remind us that small things did matter. A cup of water. A smile. A reassuring touch. And yet it was hard for these wilderness times to not suck us into a hole of despair or cynicism. Jesus would remind us that God was with us in these wilderness time, just as God was with us in troubled times in the past.

Jesus would remind us of the wilderness times of our ancestors. He did that on that night we shared that last supper, when we shared the traditional Passover feast. This is the night.... This is the night we sing. This is the night, this is the night, when the Lord God led our forbearers, Israel's children, from slavery in Egypt and made them pass dry-shod through the Red Sea."

I remember thinking that the opening question of the meal that night "How is this night different from all other nights?" had a different feel this time. The food we use to tell the story – the foods representing our days in slavery in Egypt: the karpas and the maror that remind of us the tears we shed and the bitterness of Egyptian slavery. The roasted lamb shank bone that represents the offering of sacrificial lambs that we once took to the temple. And the unleavened bread reminding us of the haste in which we left Egypt – so quickly we could not wait for the bread dough to rise. Those foods tell the story of who we are as a people and how we were freed from the long darkness of the wilderness, of slavery and oppression; those foods tell the story of how God never abandoned us. As we retold the wilderness stories of Moses leading us to a new homeland in Canaan, of the gift of the laws that shaped us into community and how God desired to restore us as the people of the covenant ...we were reminded of the covenant God made with us through those made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; and with Noah and David and Moses.

And then something extraordinary happened. Jesus used food to tell the story of a new covenant. Yes – you heard right – a new covenant. He took bread and after he had given thanks, he broke it and he told us: this is my body which is given for you. And he took the cup of wine and he told us that this cup that is poured out is a new covenant sealed in his blood for the forgiveness of sins. And then Jesus told us that we should eat this bread and drink this cup in remembrance of him. In remembrance of him.

So I guess it is appropriate that these words of Jesus have rung out across the years. Again and again we should come to the table in remembrance of him. For there is a new chapter to the story, the story of who we are as a people and how we were freed from the wilderness of sin; of how God never abandoned us and how much God loved us that God sent Jesus into the world, not to condemn it, but to save it; of how God desired us to be people of this new covenant.

In remembrance of him, we come to the table as separate beings and we are fed at the table and become a community, Christ's body here on earth. We did not really understand what that would mean that night so long ago. I wonder if those who came after us understood. I do remember the wilderness of despair in our hearts, especially when one of us betrayed Jesus. Or really when we all betrayed him. And I do remember it was not the end of the story. And that is a story for another day. Amen.