

Thursday

This is the Thursday before Easter, or the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, as recorded by our gospel writers, which is the day that they were to eat the Passover meal. This is the momentous day that the Christian church now marks as the day Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, showing his disciples that they would soon transition from life under the old covenant, to life under the new covenant. Looking at the four gospel accounts of this day, we find that Matthew, Mark, and Luke follow a very similar storyline, while John's account is quite different. So, to get the full picture of this day, we will start by looking at the 3 similar stories in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Then we will look at the lengthy 5 chapters(!) of John, highlighting teachings and prayers that Jesus shared during the meal. This devotional will only scratch the surface on some of the important things that happened today, I hope you see it as an invitation to take a deeper look at anything that sparks your interest.

The day starts with the disciples asking Jesus where he would like to eat the Passover meal. Luke tells us that Jesus sent two disciples sent to prepare the room- Peter and John. Jesus, in a similar fashion to how he gave directions to find a donkey's colt on Sunday, tells them to walk into Jerusalem, follow a man carrying a water jug, and ask him to show them where they can eat the Passover. I get the feeling Jesus did this often, sending the disciples out on a vague errand for him. But it seems the disciples had seen this work out enough times to trust Jesus, and of course, they find the man and the room exactly as Jesus described.

We are not told if Jesus did anything else that day. It is possible that he taught at the temple one last time, or perhaps Jesus rested, knowing what a demanding time was ahead. We are not told. There is an interesting story in John's gospel that could have happened any day this week. I'll mention it here just because it might make sense for it to have happened the last time Jesus taught at the temple. John says some Greeks requested to see Jesus by asking Philip to get a meeting with him. When Philip asks Jesus if they can do this, Jesus surprisingly replies, "*The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified*" (John 12:23).

Jesus has patiently taught and answered questions for days, but suddenly, his hour has come, and he will no longer entertain questions. The voice of God speaks from heaven, answering Jesus' call for God to glorify his name. Some in the crowd thought it was thunder, while others thought it was an angel speaking. John tells us that after addressing the crowd one last time, that Jesus then hid himself from them. It seems to mark the end of Jesus' ministry to the crowd that had followed him into Jerusalem last Sunday. There is now a shift in Jesus' mission. The hour has come, and he must prepare his disciples for his departure.

Jesus and the rest of the disciples arrive at the house with the upper room to share the Passover meal on Thursday evening. The Passover meal was traditionally not eaten until after

sunset. Jesus shocks the disciples by telling them one of them at this very table was going to betray him. They all question Jesus and each other who this could be, and they are upset. Interestingly, Matthew and John, the two gospel writers who were in the room when this happened, both record that Jesus identified Judas as the betrayer by dipping bread and handing it to Judas, and saying to Judas, *“Yes, it is you”* (Matt 26:25), and *“What you are about to do, do quickly”* (John 13:27). Judas then takes the bread, and leaves the house. The disciples seem not to understand why he left; they cannot fathom that one of their own would really betray Jesus.

It is unclear if Judas left before or after this point, but we now turn to what we know as the first “Lord’s Supper,” when Jesus shared the bread and the cup. We read that as the meal went on, that Jesus *“took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way, after the supper, he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you”* (Luke 22:19-21).

To understand how momentous the words, “new covenant,” are, we need to go back to Jeremiah 31:31-34. Here, the Lord tells Jeremiah that, *“The time is coming... when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel...It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers...For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”*

The old covenant depended on mankind’s obedience, and was fraught with failure. The new covenant would depend on Jesus’ obedience, and as the disciples would soon see, his blood shed to wipe away our sins. We are not told if the disciples made this connection in this moment, but the writer of Hebrews makes this connection for us in Hebrews 8. It is hard to adequately describe importance of this moment! It’s the reason we have an Old Testament and a New Testament. And by asking us to drink the cup and break the bread often to remember this moment, Jesus is showing us how very important it is to remember we are no longer under the old covenant. It brings a whole new way we can relate to God, a much better way!

Now we turn to John’s gospel and the many pages he wrote about these amazing few hours in the upper room. Entire books have been written about the significance of some of things Jesus said and did in these chapters, so there is no way to adequately cover it all, but I will try to hit the highlights. First, John tells us that as the meal was being served, Jesus got up, found a towel, wrapped it around his waist, and poured water in a basin. Jesus then stoops and kneels before the first disciple, and to his surprise, begins washing and drying his feet. I can imagine that whatever banter or chatter was happening before this, the room is now so quiet you could hear a pin drop. No one says a word until Jesus gets to Peter, who tries to prevent Jesus from washing his feet and asks a strangely worded question, *“Lord, do you wash my feet?”*

It’s reminiscent of another question worded this way, some three years ago. When Jesus asked John the Baptist to baptize him, John responded, *“I need to be baptized by you, and do you*

come to me" (Matt 3:14)? I'm not a Greek scholar, so take this with a grain of salt, but I do see the similarity in both situations and both questions being asked in such disbelief that the word "why" is not needed. Both Peter and John firmly believed that Jesus was the Son of God in these moments, and they cannot fathom why Jesus would want to submit himself to them- to John by letting him baptize Jesus, and to Peter, by doing the dirty work of a servant and washing his feet. It's so astonishing that Peter refuses to let Jesus touch his feet until Jesus explains things further. *"Unless I wash you, you have no part with me"* (John 13:8). It's not just a lesson in humility; it's a lesson in how the new covenant works. No longer will they depend on ritual cleansings and animal sacrifices to be right with God. The washing of Jesus is now all that is needed to save them.

After the meal, Jesus predicts that before the rooster crows, Peter will deny that he knows Jesus three times. Peter, again in disbelief, says he would rather die for Jesus rather than deny him. But Jesus moves on to say many things to the remaining 11 disciples. Everything he says is so rich and deep, it's hard to take the beauty of it in all at once. Here is a brief description of these beautiful promises and prayers. If you want to read them all the way through, they are found in John 13-17.

Jesus gives them a new commandment to go along with the new covenant. *"Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples"* (John 13:35). Jesus gives them many comforting words to encourage them once he is gone. He promises to come back for them, like a bridegroom to his betrothed bride. He says, *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you"* (John 14:1-2). He clarifies that he is now the gateway to heaven when he says, *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me"* (John 14:6). He tells them they can ask the Father for anything in Jesus' name, and it will be done. He tells them about the Holy Spirit, who will come to their aid once he is gone. *"But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you"* (John 14:26). He describes himself as the vine, and all believers as the branches, with good fruit being produced only when our branches are connected to him.

He sums up the reason for telling the disciples so many things and says, *"All this I have told you so that you will not go astray"* (John 16:1). He warns the disciples of the ways they will be persecuted for following Jesus. Even with so much said, Jesus says, *"I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth"* (John 16:12). He describes the grief that will come upon the disciples soon, but that it will be turned to joy when he sees them again.

Finally, after saying all that he can say, Jesus prays. Jesus prays for himself first, in a magnificent prayer that sums up everything that we've talked about in Holy week so far, and it removes any possible argument that Jesus was just a good teacher, but not God. He prays, *"Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: That they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began"* (John 17:1-5).

Next, Jesus prays a prayer for protection over his disciples, and finishes with a prayer for all believers. Jesus' prayer for all believers focuses more on unity than protection. Protection and unity will be needed for the church to survive the brutal persecution that will come from Rome, especially from Nero in the coming years. Jesus takes the time to cover the very beginnings of his church in prayer, even though his own persecution and suffering is very near. He ends his prayer with another treasure, and says, *"Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world"* (John 17:24).

How precious it is to know that Jesus wants to be with us for all eternity!

After Jesus' prayer, they sing a hymn, and Jesus and the disciples head out of the city and walk back to the Mount of Olives, as they have done every night this week. On this night, they don't walk all the way back to the town of Bethany. Rather, Jesus walks to a Garden called Gethsemane. He gives the disciples more disturbing news. Jesus says, *"You will all fall away because of me this night"* (Matt. 26:31). Peter makes a bit of a proud boast in response, *"Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away"* (Matt. 26:33). Jesus responds to Peter and tells him that he will deny him not once, but three times before the rooster crows. Peter can't believe this, and says he would die with Jesus. The other disciples join Peter and they all say they would die with Jesus. Little did they know that they would face this decision to run or die in just a few hours.

Jesus then asks only Peter, James, and John to accompany him further into the garden. Now Jesus' entire countenance is changed, full of sorrow *"to the point of death."* He leaves the three disciples and walks a bit further, where he *"fell with his face to the ground and prayed"* (Matt 26:39). He prays in anguish, sweat dripping from his face like blood from a wound. The descriptions of Jesus' anguish almost seem like hyperbole, but the point of it all is to show how very dreadful the next 24 hours will be for Jesus. Jesus knows that he is about to suffer more than any human in this world has ever suffered. He will not only suffer physically as his body is tortured and killed, but mentally as he the awful foreknowledge of what is coming, and

spiritually, as the wrath of God, his Father, is about to be poured out on him for the sins of the world.

In the face of such suffering, what does Jesus do? He prays. Mark, who may have even been an eye-witness of this prayer, says Jesus prayed, *“Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will”* (Mark 14:36). Jesus eventually gets up from praying, and comes to check on Peter, James, and John. Despite seeing Jesus’ countenance change and how he fell on his face to pray, they have fallen asleep, and Jesus seems disappointed that they could not stay awake and support him. So much could be said about the suffering Jesus experienced this night as he anticipated the terrible things that would soon happen. But I will finish off by just noting that his suffering was voluntary. Jesus had all the power and authority of his status as the Son of God. He could have gotten up and walked away from Jerusalem and never returned. But he stayed, and he stayed voluntarily. He asked the Father if there was any other way to defeat sin and death, but the answer from the Father was no, this was the only way. And so, he stayed, he stayed knowing that an armed crowd would soon arrive to arrest him and have their way with him. He stayed because he loves us enough to suffer not just death, but the anticipation of death. He stayed because he wanted to make a way for us to be with him forever.

Extra Reading: Matthew 26:17-46, Mark 14:12-42, Luke 22:7-46, John 13:1-18:1