

Maundy Thursday
April 1, 2010


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University Lutheran Chapel
Minneapolis, Minnesota

✠ Jesu juva ✠

INTO THE PRESENCE OF GOD

Exodus 24:3-11; I Corinthians 11:23-32; John 13:1-15, 34-35

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

hey had just heard the Book of the Covenant, had promised to be faithful, and then had been sprinkled with blood of oxen. They had passed the barriers set up to keep the people safe from the wrath of God. And then they climbed, upward they went, seventy of them along with Moses, his brother Aaron, and Nadab and Abihu, until their eyes beheld Him. And they were not slain. The One standing on the clear sapphire pavement of heaven did not strike them down. Rather, according to Moses, "So they saw God, and they ate and drank."

Can you imagine what that must have been like? No? Well, neither could the rest of the Israelites, nor their descendents, down to our very day. For the Israelites, this happened only once. And even then not all of the 600,000 men who had come out of Egypt were invited to this Divine Feast, but only 74 of them, and these the leaders of the people. For the rest, the presence of God remained "a consuming fire", holy and unapproachable.

And so it remained for centuries the only person who was allowed into the presence of God Himself was the High Priest; and then, only once each year on the Day of Atonement. And then only having sacrificed and only if he were carrying the blood of the sacrifice. Symbolically the High Priest bore the people into God's presence, wearing a breastplate with one precious stone for each of the twelve tribes, but they themselves could not enter. Anyone else who ventured into the Holy of Holies would be struck dead by God.

And why? Because they did not keep the covenant. They were not faithful to the words they had agreed to keep when they said: "All that the Lord has said we will do, and be obedient." None of them were holy, not even the High Priest who had to first sacrifice for his own sins before performing the sacrifice for the others. And so the people could not approach God directly. And they certainly did not eat and drink with Him.

The disciples of Jesus ate and drank with Him all of the time, of course. God had come in the person of Jesus in order to establish access once again. And that could be done only by removing that which makes people unholy, only by removing their sins and making them holy.

And now, the night of the Passover Feast, the night in which He would be betrayed and taken away from them to do just that, to go to the cross to save them from their sins, Jesus establishes a meal by which they will continue to be able to eat with Him, a meal in which He would be present among them even after He had departed from them, a meal which would, as with the elders of Israel long ago, usher them into the presence of God. The writer to the Hebrews tells us: "Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water." And so Jesus, the disciples already having been washed with pure water when they were baptized by John, reminds them of this baptism by washing their feet. And then He gives them His flesh to eat and His blood to drink, and tells them "this is the new covenant in My blood" – a covenant not like the old one which could not be kept, but a covenant that requires only one thing, that Christ keep it, that is, that He die to enact it.



By His death the sins under the old covenant have been removed once and for all. And with this new covenant He imparts to us the holiness and righteousness that are His alone to give, since He alone is holy and righteous. It is imparted to us first when we are washed with the pure waters of baptism. And it is reinforced in us when we hear and believe His Gospel. And then there is the Supper.

This is no mere memorial meal, like the Passover meal it replaced. It is as, St. Paul reminds us today, the true and physical body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which He gives to us to eat and drink. And through this meal of His flesh and His blood heaven is opened again. Though you likely will not have visions of Christ standing on the sapphire pavements of the heavens, He is truly here. And not only the elders and rulers of the Church are invited to come, but all the faithful are given access, all who have been washed with the pure waters of baptism and who hold to the true confession of faith.

And what's more, we are given to ascend to the altar to eat and drink with God, not just once, but every time this Sacrament is celebrated. For by His grace we are not cut off from His presence, but are invited into the Holy of Holies through this Supper, entered by means of His flesh and His blood. Come, then. Eat and drink with God. Amen.

✠ Soli Deo gloria ✠