

Message: “This Holy Mystery”, presented by Reverend Kristen Lowe on 10-01-2017 at Crossroads United Methodist Church, Waunakee, WI.

Just before Jesus was betrayed and crucified, he gathered his disciples together for an annual ritual celebrating the Jewish escape. The ritual celebrates God’s providence as the people were saved from slavery to the Egyptians. During this ritual, Jesus changed the meaning. He said the elements stood for something else. He said that this was to be a new covenant and that the elements represented something completely different. From now on the elements would represent God’s providence as we are saved from slavery to sin and death to a life of salvation.

Matthew 26:17-30

On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?”

He replied, “Go into the city to a certain man and tell him, ‘The Teacher says: My appointed time is near. I am going to celebrate the Passover with my disciples at your house.’”

So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover.

When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve. And while they were eating, he said, “Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.”

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They were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, “Surely you don’t mean me, Lord?”

Jesus replied, “The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born.”

Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, “Surely you don’t mean me, Rabbi?”

Jesus answered, “You have said so.”

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take and eat; this is my body.”

Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the [b] covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.”

When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

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A little girl asked her mother, “Mommy, why do you cut the ends off the meat before you cook it?”

The girl’s mother told her that she thought it added to the flavor by allowing the meat to better absorb the spices, but perhaps she should ask her grandmother since she always did it that way.

So the little girl found her grandmother and asked, “Grandma, why do you and mommy cut the ends of the meat off before you cook it?”

Her grandmother thought a moment and answered, “I think it allows the meat to stay tender because it soaks up the juices better, but why don’t you ask your great grandma... after all, I learned from her, and she always did it that way.”

The little girl was getting a little frustrated, but climbed up in her great-grandmother’s lap and asked, “Nana, why do you cut the ends off the meat before you cook it?”

Nana answered, “I had to; my cooking pot wasn’t big enough.”

We do a lot of things in life, and seldom stop to ask why. We develop habits and traditions, and if we’re not careful, we can forget why we do certain things...

In 2004, the United Methodist Church made a startling discovery. After a survey of parishioners around the world, it was discovered that people were hungry for communion.

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People were hungry for the deep spiritual meaning and life changing holiness offered through God’s grace in the bread and the cup. They ached to have something supernatural happen when they tasted the bread and put the cup to their lips. They were tired of going through the motions and were seeking the true meaning behind the ritual.

So, through a long process, the Book of Resolutions and the Book of Discipline, it was determined that Bishops, District Superintendents, and other annual conference and general church authorities would be urged to prepare their Pastors better and to hold them accountable for their sacramental theology, practice, and teaching.

That’s a lot of long language for – helping folks understand what communion means.

I think before we can fully understand the communion ritual that happened during the Last Supper, we must first understand the Passover. This is the meal that Jesus ate with his disciples on the night that he was betrayed.

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When he decided to gather his disciples for that meal in the upper room, it's not like Jesus told them, “Hey, let's get together and have communion,” or “let's have the Last Supper.” Nope, Jesus said that he earnestly desired to celebrate the Passover with his disciples before he was to suffer.

And that night, he took all the ancient and religious symbolism and shed new light on it.

The Passover celebrated what God had done for the Jews releasing them from Egyptian captivity. The Passover Jesus celebrated with his disciples took that symbolism a step further and created a new ritual for us – to celebrate God releasing us from sin's captivity.

Since we traditionally don't celebrate the annual Passover or seder meal, it makes sense that we're not acclimated with its symbolism.

So, I'll give you an overview. This special meal was celebrated during Jesus' time and is still celebrated by the Jewish community. We know that when we use all of our senses together, the message becomes more vivid. It moves deeper into our memory and heart.

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Before the beginning of the Passover, all leaven, which is a symbol of sin (1 Cor. 5:6-8), would be removed from the Jewish home. The house is cleaned from top to bottom.

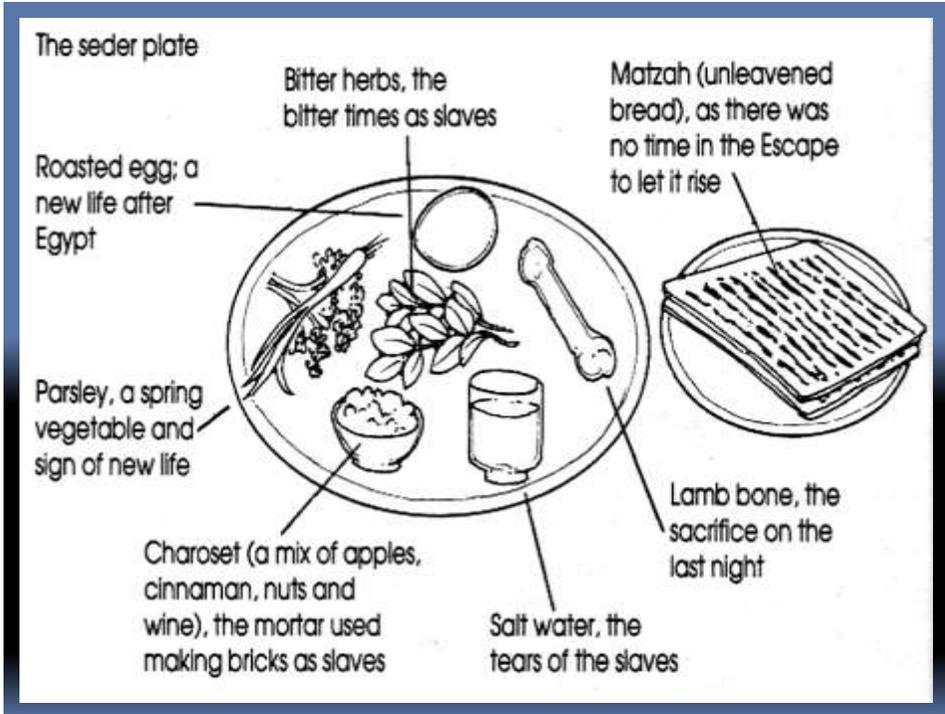
Once the leaven is removed, the family sits around the table and ceremonially washes their hands with a special laver and towel. Jesus also took part in this tradition, but rather than wash his hands, he got up from the table and washed the feet of his disciples, giving us an unparalleled lesson in humility (John 13:2-17).

When the house and the participants are ceremonially clean, the Passover seder can begin. The woman of the house says a blessing and lights the Passover candles.

Then - haggadah - the telling of the story of Passover using symbols and object lessons. Afterwards, the cups of wine are given thanks over and blessed.

The meal is continued with each article on the table - plates, cups, food, everything, all symbolizing God's acts of mercy in freeing the Jewish slaves from captivity. Blood, tears and rushed departure are all symbolized through food and are tasted by each person, as each is instructed to feel as if they themselves had experienced the flight from Egypt. And by eating and drinking the elements, it's a way for us to take in the experience and make it part of us.

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In every Jewish home, on every seder plate, is a bare shank bone of a lamb. In the book of Exodus, the Jewish slaves were told to apply the blood of an innocent, spotless lamb to the doorposts of their homes. As a result, the angel of death passed by those homes that had the blood. In similar fashion, the angel of death passes us by because Jesus' blood was perfect and spotless... and when we symbolically apply his blood to the doorposts of our heart, we're spared! When we depart from this earth, we find that we are not dead at all, but alive forever and living in pure joy and peace forever in paradise. As John the Baptist said when he saw Jesus coming towards him, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29)

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After the meal is finished, the leader of the seder lets the children loose to hunt for the afikomen, which was wrapped in a napkin and hidden before the meal. The house is in a ruckus as everyone rushes around to be the first to find the afikomen. Once it is found, the leader breaks it up into pieces and distributes a small piece to everyone seated around the table.



The kids never let David forget the year he just couldn't find the afikoman

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The tradition perhaps dates back to the time of Jesus. If this is the case, then Luke 22:19 takes on a greater meaning:



“And he 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.’” For Jesus the Messiah would have taken the middle one of the three pieces of motza, the piece that stood for the priest or mediator between God and the people, broken it as his body would be broken, wrapped half in a linen napkin as he would be wrapped in linen for burial, hidden it as he would be buried, brought it back as he would be resurrected, and distributed it to everyone seated with him, as he would distribute his life to all who believe. As he did this, he was conscious that this middle piece of motza represented his own, spotless body given for the redemption of his people.

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In the seder meal, there are 4 cups of wine that are blessed. The third cup of wine is taken after the meal. It is the cup of redemption, "in the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.'" This was not just any cup; it was the cup of redemption from slavery into freedom. This is our communion cup.

When Jesus gathered with his disciples for that final meal, he knew what was coming. And in typical Jesus fashion, he used illustrations, things around him to help them understand. But what he also did that night was create a way for you and me to remember... to take it all in - if you will - our own release from the captivity of sin and death through Jesus Christ. Amen.

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AND BROKE IT, AND GAVE IT TO THEM,
SAYING, "THIS IS MY BODY GIVEN FOR YOU;
DO THIS IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME."

LUKE 22:19

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