

WHAT'S NEW ABOUT THE NEW COVENANT: BODY AND BLOOD

SHERARD EDINGTON

Luke 22:14-23

Today, I'm starting a four-week sermon series called "What's New About the New Covenant." And central to this series is, not surprisingly, the idea of covenant.

If we're going to talk about covenant, then we need to start at the beginning with creation. In the beginning, the cosmos existed in chaos. But God patiently and methodically brought order to this chaos by separating the light from the dark, the water from the dry land, and by creating life. Among this life was humankind. Then, in a separate story, we are told how God places these humans in an idyllic place where they might live with God in comfort and safety. But they desired more. They desired to be like gods, and they sinned. The consequence of this sin was to be cast out into the harsh world.

The Bible follows the descendants of those who are cast out. We also find the story of the great flood and the odd little tale of the people building a tower to reach heaven.

But things really get going when God reaches out to two specific people—Abraham and Sarah—and calls them into covenant. I will talk about covenants in depth later in this series. For now, it is enough to view a covenant as an agreement, it's like a contract.

The covenant that God made with Abraham and Sarah was this: that God would make of them a great nation with many descendants. And God will make it so that their names themselves will be a blessing. Abraham and Sarah agree, and they follow God to a new land. They have a son Isaac. Isaac has two sons, Esau and Jacob. Jacob has twelve sons whose descendants will become the Israelites. Their story continues into Egypt, the wilderness, and the promised land.

All the while, God remains faithful to the covenant promise. But, sadly, time and again, the people sin and break their side of the covenant. God sends prophets to the people to show them the way back to the fold, but the people continue to stray.

Finally, God decides to take matters into his own hands, and he comes to us as one of us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is Emmanuel—God with us. He is fully human and fully God. He lives a human life teaching and preaching about how people might find their way back to the Lord. He seeks to remind us that God is loving and gracious and forgiving.

Through miracles and deeds of power and healing, Jesus showed us that God is indeed here with us. In our scripture reading for today, Jesus proclaims himself to be the New Covenant. This does not mean that the old covenant that God made with Abraham and Sarah has been erased. No. But Christ becomes the final and concluding iteration of God's covenant with humanity.

Our scripture reading for today takes place at a meal. This shouldn't be surprising since so much of what Jesus does involves meals and food. But this one takes place at the Passover feast, which commemorates the occasion of the Israelites escaping Egypt. It was on that night that the Angel of God passes over the houses of the Israelites bringing death the Egyptians.

In Jesus' day, Passover was a popular feast. Jews from all corners of the world converged on Jerusalem to celebrate together. The Passover meal in our reading is the one we call the Last Supper—Jesus' final meal before his crucifixion.

For this feast, Jesus and his disciples have rented a room. They've bought the food, and now they are at the table together. Jesus tells them that he is going to suffer and that he is eager to share this meal with them before does.

Then Jesus takes a loaf of bread from the table and holds it up for them as he offers a blessing of thanks. He breaks the bread and hands it out to each of them saying, *This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.*

Now, the Passover meal is a highly ritualized event. Every part of it has a meaning or a story. The bread, for example, represents the unleavened bread that the Israelites took with them in their haste to escape Pharaoh's army. It would be like at Thanksgiving, if the host were to hold up the cranberry sauce and say, "This sauce is a reminder of the blood spilled by our ancestors as they fought the oppressive forces of Black Friday." Or maybe it was the yams. I'm not sure.

But what Jesus here is doing is redefining the Passover meal. No longer does the meal celebrate the freedom from slaver to the Egyptians. It now symbolizes freedom from slavery to sin. He is telling his disciples that the bread now represents his body. From now on, when they take bread, they are to remember him.

Then he takes the cup of wine, and holding it up, he tells them, *This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.* As Jews, they all know about the covenant, but now they hear Jesus define himself as being the new covenant.

Jesus comes to us as God's covenant promise to bring us back to God. But as we know, because of our sins, we can't do this ourselves. We can't will it or work it. No matter how many good deeds we attempt, they will never overwrite our sin. The only way that we can gain entry into the kingdom is with God's help, with God's forgiveness, with God's mercy. And the only remittance that will offset the debt of our sin is the sacrifice of the one who had no sin. The new covenant comes at the

pouring of Jesus' blood. And through the new covenant, our sins are forgiven, and the doors of God's kingdom becomes open to us.

And that right there should be enough. But what does it mean for us exactly? Can we take this a bit further? Yes, and I want to propose three lessons that we can take from the new covenant.

The first is this. In the new covenant, all are welcome at the table. As I mentioned, much of what we read about Jesus involves meals and food. Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners, he tells parables about a wedding feast, he goes to Zachaeus' home for a meal, he feeds 5000 people with only some scraps of fish and bread. If Jesus were to appear to us today, I'm sure it would be on the Food Network.

But what is so remarkable is that Jesus doesn't turn away anyone from the table. And nowhere in is this more apparent than in today's reading. Did you notice who is at the table? It is the disciples, but also Judas. After lifting the cup, Jesus says to them, *The one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table.* Judas has already made the arrangements with the authorities to hand over Jesus. And Jesus knows it. And he allows Judas to dine at the table. Judas is included in this fellowship.

Now don't think that the rest of the disciples are perfect. They aren't. They all betrayed Jesus in their own little ways. They fight and argue over who among them is the best disciple and who will sit at Jesus' right hand. They run from the authorities when in danger. Peter will deny knowing Jesus. The disciples are far from perfect exemplars of faith.

And we are like that. We sin and we turn from God, and we betray Jesus in our small ways. But still, through mercy we can't comprehend, we are welcomed at the table. In a moment, we will make that real as we gather for communion. There is no fence here, there are no bouncers at the door, there's no Walmart greeter checking your receipts. There is us and the table and the spirit of God. In the new covenant we all are welcome.

The second lesson that I see here is that in the new covenant we are called to change. By coming to the table with Christ, we are challenged to act as he acts. We are challenged to accept all people. We are challenged to come to the table not just with our family and friends, but even with those who seek to cause us hurt.

It breaks my heart when I hear someone say that they do not feel worthy to be in a church. I want to hug them and say, "You are the person that Christ wants most in his fellowship. You are the one that Christ wants not because you claim to be perfect, but because you recognize that you are broken. The new covenant calls us to change and become more like Christ.

The third lesson for today is that in the new covenant we can experience God's kingdom. Since the first humans were cast out of the garden, God has sought to open his glorious realm to us. The kingdom is here, but we're not ready for it. Our sin prevents us from entering. Occasionally, in a moment of compassion or grace, we might catch a glimpse of God's kingdom, enough to remind us of its presence.

At the Passover table, Jesus told his disciples, *I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes*. He said this to let them know that the Kingdom is near. The new covenant is bringing it closer. Through the new covenant we shall behold the glories of God's kingdom and feast at God's table.

On this day, let us rejoice in the sacred gift of God's new covenant. Amen.