

**24 Hours That Changed the World:  
The Last Supper  
Exodus 12:1-13 and Mark 14:12-25  
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This morning is the first Sunday of Lent. We have entered the Lenten season, as the Church does every year, to prepare ourselves for Jesus' journey to the cross. Lent is a time devoted to self-reflection and penitence, a time to acknowledge our sinfulness and our need for God's mercy. Lent mirrors the 40 days of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, which itself mirrored the 40-day trials experienced by Noah, Moses and Elijah. Historically, this has been the season when the Church focused on the spiritual disciplines that lead us to self-examination, repentance, prayer, fasting and self-denial.

But, it seems fewer and fewer Christians understand or practice Lenten disciplines, and worse still, there is less understanding of the special events of Holy Week. People jump straight from the "hosanna's" of Palm Sunday to the jubilation of Easter's "He is risen." By doing that, we miss something that is absolutely essential. Without the events of Holy Week, and the preparation of Lent that leads to them, we have no context in which to appreciate why Easter is life-changing, earth-shattering, good news. Without immersing ourselves in Jesus' final days, the Sunday after Good Friday simply becomes an excuse to dress up, eat chocolate-covered marshmallows shaped like bunny rabbits, and hunt brightly-colored eggs. No wonder faith becomes so anemic, without the power to transform much of anything, least of all our hearts.

I hope it won't surprise you to hear me say that I don't want Calvary to be a church that just goes through the motions, not anytime, but especially not at Lent. So, this year we're going to do something a little different to help us more deeply enter this season of preparation and repentance. For the six Sundays of Lent we will be walking through the last 24 hours of Jesus' life. His final day is marked by particular events that occurred in very specific locations. We're going to trace those events and walk through those locations, step-by-step. As we do so, my invitation to you is that you will open your heart to listen carefully to God's Spirit so that together, we might be moved and changed this Lenten season by contemplating what Jesus did for us.

The first stop on our journey with Jesus is the upper room, but before we look at the significance of what takes place there, let's put the scene into context. On Sunday, Jesus had entered Jerusalem to fanfare and accolades. By the time he reclines at the table to eat the Passover feast with his disciples, the Jewish religious leaders are plotting his death. Seldom have the fortunes of any historical figure changed as quickly and dramatically as Jesus' did in the last week of his life. Jesus knew what was coming. He had foretold all of it, but the disciples never had understood it. They were convinced that Jesus was the Messiah and that they were in Jerusalem on this Passover so that he could overthrow the Romans and claim his kingdom.

Since his arrival in the city four days earlier, Jesus had gone to the Temple each day. The week started with him overthrowing the moneychangers' tables and driving out the merchants who were doing business in the Temple's outer court, all of which infuriated the religious leaders. Each day Jesus returned to the Temple to teach and as he taught, he pressed harder on his religious reforms, challenging those same Temple leaders again and again. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" he said. "For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth." (Matt. 23:27) He chastised them for their spiritual pride, their hard hearts, and their religion of rules that served only to alienate those who were lost. With every charge and challenge, Jesus further angered the Jewish leaders, and the tension grew with every passing day. By Thursday, it was clear they were plotting to put Jesus to death.

Around noon on Thursday, Jesus sent two of his disciples—we know from Matthew's Gospel that it was Peter and John—to go into the city, secure a place for them to eat the Passover meal and make all the necessary preparations. They were told to look for a man carrying a jar of water which would have been easy to spot, since carrying water was a woman's job. He was the man who would provide the room for the meal.

Everything unfolded just as Jesus had said. Peter and John made the preparations in the upper room, which many scholars believe is the same room where a few weeks later, 120 disciples would gather and find themselves filled with the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. Around mid-afternoon, Peter and John would have taken a lamb to the Temple for sacrifice, joining tens of thousands of people arriving for that purpose throughout the day. As people sang psalms, the lamb's throat would be slit; a priest would catch the blood in a bowl and then pour it at the base of the altar while another priest butchered the lamb. Peter and John would

then take the meat and return to the kitchen at the upper room, where the lamb would be basted in oil or wine and roasted for several hours. By around 7 p.m., Jesus and the other disciples would have joined Peter and John for the meal.

The Passover Seder is a meal commemorating God's central saving act toward Israel, when Moses led them out of slavery in Egypt. The Israelites had been slaves for 400 years when God called Moses to deliver them. Moses demanded that Pharaoh release the people, but the Egyptian monarch refused. God then brought a series of plagues upon Egypt, but still, Pharaoh would not relent. Finally, God sent the Angel of Death to kill the firstborn in every household and among every flock through the entire land. On the appointed night, the Israelites were to sacrifice a lamb to God and mark the doorposts of their homes with its blood. The angel would then "pass over" the homes marked by the lamb's blood, sparing the firstborn in that household. The lamb was to be cooked and eaten, giving the Israelites one final meal, one "last supper" in Egypt, before they were delivered.

Death did indeed visit the land in the middle of the night, from the humblest dwelling to Pharaoh's palace. In the morning, Egypt was awash in grief. Amid the devastation, Pharaoh finally relented and ordered the Israelites to leave. They prepared to flee so quickly that there was no time to leaven their dough and allow it to rise. As a result, the bread they took with them was unleavened.

The Passover Seder is a meal filled with ritual. Jews eat bitter herbs to remind them of the bitterness the Israelites experienced as slaves. The herbs are dipped into salt water which represents their tears. They eat a pureed apple mixture called charoset that is meant to look like the mortar out of which the Israelites made bricks. Unleavened matzoh is a reminder of the haste of the Israelite's escape, and the lamb recalls the lamb slain on that first Passover. The meal is a feast. It lasts for several hours and glasses of wine are interspersed throughout. If you've ever finished an elaborate Thanksgiving meal and felt like you needed a nap, maybe you can empathize with those disciples who fell asleep later in the evening, rather than being able to stay awake and watchful with Jesus.

Perhaps this particular Passover with the disciples did start out as the festive celebration they usually are. But, I imagine somewhere in the course of the evening, that began to change. Everyone was conscious of the heightened tension between Jesus and the religious leaders. People were wondering about what was coming. Jesus cut through the uncertainty with a statement that would have shocked those at the table like a bolt of electricity suddenly hitting them: "One of

you will betray me.” (Mark 14:18) He knew which one, of course, but he did not say. The story of betrayal winds its way through the rest of the Gospel accounts of the final 24 hours of Jesus’ life. Before the night was through, Judas would betray Jesus; Peter would deny him; and the disciples would desert him, leaving Jesus utterly alone as he endured being tried at the hands of his enemies.

The echoes of Jesus’ prediction and of the acts of cowardice by those closest to him are still disquieting. Jesus might well have said, “All of you will betray me”; and with that realization, we must look at ourselves. When have you been Judas? When have you been Peter or the other disciples? When have you betrayed Jesus or denied or deserted him? The reality is that all of us will at some time betray him—every single one of us.

After announcing his betrayal, Jesus took the matzoh and said a blessing over it, but what he said next perplexed his friends: “Take, eat; this is my body,” and over the wine, “This is my blood of the new covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” Wait! That’s not part of the standard liturgy of the Passover. What could Jesus possibly mean? As was so often the case, the disciples didn’t understand what Jesus was talking about; nevertheless, they ate and drank.

What Jesus said that night changed everything. He transformed the Jewish Passover, giving to all people instead the Eucharist, Holy Communion. The Israelites had become a covenant people by the blood of animals; the Last Supper established a new covenant ratified by the blood of Jesus for all humanity. Where the Seder was once the story of God’s liberation of the Israelite slaves, from this time forward it was the story of God’s liberation of all humankind from slavery to sin and death. In this meal, God gave the entire human race new life and a new beginning and made those who choose to follow Jesus into his family. In this meal and through his death and resurrection, Jesus invited all humankind to become God’s covenant people.

For the Jewish people, God’s deliverance of them from slavery in Egypt is their defining story. In the Passover liturgy there is a line that says that in every generation, people should see themselves as if they were slaves in Egypt. “You start out a slave and at the end of the meal you are free.” In a very similar way, Communion is the meal by which we as Christians remember our defining story. We remember the last 24 hours of Jesus’ life as the story of God whose love for us is so profound, so amazing that God’s only Son came to lay down his life as the sign and seal of a covenant that would deliver the human race from death. We

repeat this meal, re-enacting it as a way to remember, and through our remembering to have our lives reformed, reordered and transformed. This meal is to define who we are: people who were once slaves, slaves whose freedom from sin and death came at the cost of a person; that God, walking in human flesh, suffered and died for us. Thanks be to God. Amen.