

Maundy Thursday, April 1, 2021

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminister, Massachusetts

Suffering, Death, and the Sacrament

Mark 14:12–26

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

As they were eating, he took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to them, and said, “Take; this is my body.” And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it. And he said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly, I say to you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.” And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. (vv 22–26)

When Satan entered into Judas Iscariot,
and when Judas went off to arrange the how, when, and where of Jesus’ betrayal,
and when it all was signed and sealed and the silver pieces had changed hands
—when all that had happened
and it was only a matter of hours before God would be dead,
Satan thought he had it made.
He thought he’d finally reached the peak, the top of the mountain.
At last, oh, at last he was king of the world.
At last, he had God right where he wanted him—underneath his feet.

But the thing about climbing mountains is this:
All it takes is one loose pebble, one false step, one stray noise
to start an avalanche or cause a landslide.
The whole landscape can change in a matter of mere minutes.
Satan thought he had it all wrapped up,
but he was really standing on the top of a massively unstable mountain
and the pebble had already come loose a long, long time ago,
a pebble that was really a stone cut by no human hand.
And that stone was about to smash everything—smash everything Satan held dear.
About to smash it, I say, with an avalanche of grace and a landslide of love
beyond anything the world had ever seen before.

One little pebble had set it all in motion—one whisper from way back.
It was this: **He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel** (Gen 3:15).
That's when everything started heading toward this moment.
That's when God began bending all of time and history toward this night,
and tomorrow, and the third day.
The still, small voice spoke the whisper and the pebble began to roll
and the angel appeared to Mary
and she conceived
and a Child was born and grew
and as a man He stepped into the water of the Jordan River
and set His face toward Jerusalem—
Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that stones the prophets and kills those sent to her.
He knew exactly what awaited Him there.

And it was all part of *His* plan and *His* purpose and *His* good and gracious will.
What Satan meant for evil, God meant—God means—for good.
There was something deeper at work.
There was a love that went all the way back
—a love from before time began or ever the earth and the universe had been formed,
a love the serpent didn't understand,
a love as ancient and eternal as God Himself.
Love like that is dangerous.
You never know what it might be willing to do.

That Stone, that Word, that Love **sent two of His disciples**
into the city to prepare the Passover feast.
He had it all arranged—**a large upper room furnished and ready.**
They **found it just as He had told them, and they prepared the Passover.**
Everything happens exactly as Jesus says.
Everything.
Take note of that, and take heart.
You, too, will find it just as He says,
tonight, and tomorrow, and on the Last Day.
And you'll find everything here, on this altar, just as Jesus says.

All because Jesus had something He wanted to do,
something that couldn't wait,
something that had to be done *that* night,
before another day passed,
before His suffering and death.

**As they were eating, he took bread,
and after blessing it
broke it
and gave it to them,
and said, "Take; this is my body."**

**And he took a cup,
and when he had given thanks
he gave it to them,
and they all drank of it.
And he said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant,
which is poured out for many."**

Bread, body, cup, blood, poured out, for many, for you.
Moses threw half the blood on the altar and half on the people.
Jesus poured out His blood on the cross and put His blood in the cup.
It joins us to Him, makes us His.
What benefit do we receive? What gift is this?
The forgiveness of your sins, life, and salvation.
And what does Jesus receive?
Judgment, wrath, and condemnation.
He suffered and died
so that we could have this gift,
be His and joined to Him and united with one another
as if sin had never ruined anything.

All through the sacrifice of His body and blood,
Jesus, the Passover Lamb.
He atoned for the sin of the world.
And now, like Israel of old, we see something of the face of God,
for we see how Jesus Christ, God's Son, lays down His life for His enemies.
There is no condemnation here, not for those who believe.
We behold God by faith and eat and drink.

Satan had no clue what power was in those words.
He had no clue what Jesus was giving with that bread and putting in that cup.
Jesus was putting Himself there.
Bringing the avalanche of grace and the landslide of love
through something so ordinary, so simple, so unexpected.

Through bread and wine Jesus smuggled life into the domain of darkness.
Through bread and wine He brought forgiveness into a world of sin.
Through bread and wine He sabotaged death and the power of the devil.
His suffering and death are here in the Sacrament,
and, yes, His life and His love are here, too.

Martin Luther said about this Sacrament:

“We must never regard [it] as a harmful thing from which we should flee,
but as a pure, wholesome, soothing medicine which aids and quickens us
in both soul and body.

For where the soul is healed, the body has benefited also.

Why, then, do we act as if the sacrament were a poison
which would kill us if we ate of it?” (*Large Catechism* V, 68)

Do not run from this gift but run to it.

It cannot harm you,
though it cost Jesus dearly to give it to you.
He suffered lashes, and mockery, and thorns, and nails, and spear,
and then death by suffocation
so that you could have this Supper.

Recently, I was reminded of what a treasure we have in the Sacrament.
Last October, less than six months ago,
a Christian convert in Iran received 80 lashes for drinking communion wine.
For drinking communion wine!
It wasn't the first time.
Seven years earlier, he'd been flogged for the same thing, along with others.
He counted the blood of Jesus of greater worth than his own skin.

Satan has no clue.
What Jesus pours into the cup is far greater
than the worst that can be done to our flesh.
What Jesus puts into your mouth
is stronger than any disease and sickness,
it's a danger—even deadly—to sin, death, and Satan.
It's the medicine of immortality,
of the resurrection of the body and life everlasting.

Here we have the avalanche of grace,
the landslide of love,
the tiny whisper that undoes Satan:
“My body; My blood!”

And so Satan is thrown down.
Jesus has him right where He wants him to be—
underneath his feet.

On this night, the whole landscape changed.
It went from a vision of hell to a foretaste of heaven.

So there’s suffering and death in the bread and in the cup,
His suffering and death,
and there’s love,
and there’s life,
and there’s Jesus.

He made sure of it.
On the night when He was betrayed, He put it there
so that you—yes, weak, frail, sin-sick, dying you—
so that you could have it now, today, again and again
until you go home to Christ or He returns in glory.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ
Jesus.

Phil 4:7