

At last, the day came. The day of Unleavened Bread; the day on which the Passover Lamb had to be sacrificed. Luke introduces the reading with these words. All that had led up to that day was finished. Jesus' ministry was nearly over. His work of teaching, of healing, of raising the dead was coming to its conclusion. Israel's rejection of Jesus was about to lead to violence—the plots of Jesus' enemies would come to fulfillment on that day. And then, the hour came: the hour that Jesus sat down with His disciples to eat. The end was at hand; the time had come.

And so now, for us, the time has come. All leading up to the great three days is complete. We have come through Advent and Christmas; we have seen Jesus' way prepared and then Jesus come into this world. Epiphany is behind us—we saw Jesus teach and heal and reveal Himself as the Son of God. Lent too is fast drawing to its close; our time of spiritual preparation, our time to ponder Jesus' passion has reached its climactic end. The day has come. The hour has come.

The great three days begin tonight. Not by our counting of days; but counting days according to the Jewish system. For them, the day begins in the evening. Figuring that way, tonight marks the beginning of the first day, the beginning of Friday; tomorrow night begins the second day, and the third day—the day of Easter—begins on Saturday evening. This first day we now enter is the day of Jesus' passion and suffering. In those twenty-four hours that began that evening, Jesus would be betrayed, arrested, condemned, crucified; by the end of that day, Jesus would lie dead in the tomb. How did Jesus prepare for this day? What did He do to make things ready for His death? He left behind His last testament. He brought about the new covenant, the one sealed by His Supper. He instituted this meal as the sign and seal of the new

covenant, this Holy Communion for His people. Even on this day, even as His death looms near, Jesus' concern is for His people; for granting His blessing to us.

Let us consider this meal that Christ leaves us this evening. Let us consider how Christ bids us draw near to receive this Holy Communion; how He calls us, His brothers and sisters, to dine at His family table. Let us consider how closely this binds us to our dear Savior, who made us part of His family. For that's what you are: part of Jesus' family. You are His own brother or sister; you are under the care and protection of His Father and yours. This meal that you eat is the one Christ set up for His children, His family, to eat.

To see this, we must first see that Jesus' meal is the fulfillment of the old covenant, the old meal. That first covenant was struck by God when He led Israel out of Egypt; when He made them His people through the death of the firstborn of Egypt, through the deliverance of the Passover lambs, through the waters of the Red Sea. I am the Lord your God who brought you up out of Egypt, He declares to Israel: I am the God who has made you my people by this deliverance. There is the root, the foundation of the old covenant. To commemorate this deliverance, our Lord set up the Passover meal for Israel. Each year they were to eat this meal—each year they would sacrifice Passover lambs and sit down to eat those very lambs. Each year they would make unleavened bread, and eat that bread with the Passover lamb. This was an annual commemoration of the first Passover; a concrete, tangible meal to teach future generations what God had done; to remind all Israelites of the Lord's deliverance from Egypt.

This meal was to be eaten by God's people, each with his own family. So it was at the first Passover: each family took one lamb for itself, and gathered together to eat that meal on the night the Lord led them out of bondage in Israel. And so it was for future generations: each family would gather around its table to eat its lamb: it was a family meal.

That is the meal Jesus eats on that first Maundy Thursday. But who is Jesus eating with? It is not His mother; it is not His brothers. He gathers to eat the meal with His disciples! He eats this meal with His true family. He eats the meal with those who hear the Word of God and do it—those whom He had earlier said were His mother and brothers. By eating with His disciples, Jesus shows who His true family is: those who follow Him, those who believe in Him. This spiritual bond ties Jesus' disciples more closely to Him than to anyone else. The bonds of earthly families, close as they are, are not as close as the bonds of faith and love that hold Jesus' disciples to their teacher and Lord. And so Jesus gathers to eat that last Passover with His true family; with those closest to Him—with His disciples.

And on that Passover, Jesus fulfills the old covenant meal; He brings the Passover observance to its completion. He makes this meal obsolete by providing a new meal; a new observance for His people. On that night, Jesus bids His disciples: Do this! Take bread, speak these words over it, eat my body! Do this! Take the cup, speak these words over it, drink my blood! Here is a new meal! Here is a new commemoration. This is done not to remember the Lord's deliverance from Egypt, but to remember Jesus. For He commands: Do this IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME! This meal looks back not to the exodus, but to Jesus. This meal recalls the true Passover Lamb, Jesus, who suffered in the flesh; who gave His life to deliver us from eternal death. This is a greater deliverance than God leading Israel out of Egypt. This is deliverance from sin and its eternal punishments by the blood of the Lamb. This deliverance is offered and sealed in the new meal Jesus institutes, the Lord's Supper He sets up for His family—the family He has made us part of.

For this is the meal that we eat here. Here we do what Christ bids: we take bread and wine, we speak the words, we eat and drink the body and blood of Christ. Here we receive our

true Passover Lamb on our lips; here we receive the very body and blood offered to win our salvation—and this same Christ here grants us His forgiveness and shares His life with us. Here He gathers us, His family, together around Himself; here He binds us with His body and blood to Himself, uniting us with Him more closely than with any other. And so we gather around this meal, around this table because we are Jesus' family. We eat; we are bound to Him closer than to any other; we are united in Christ with our brothers and sisters in Christ, made one family by and in our Lord and Savior.

Treasure this meal! Hold it dear in your hearts. For this is the meal that Christ bids us to eat; here is what Christ means when He says: Do this in remembrance of me. Here is Christ's concrete, tangible meal to remind us of His unfailing love, to teach us of what He has done to save us. Here is Christ's promise that through this meal, we receive His forgiveness and salvation. Here Christ offers all the blessings of heaven to us, His family. And you, dear child of God, are in need of Christ's meal, offered here for you. You are in need of its forgiveness; you are in need of its salvation. You are in need of the strength it gives for your life in Christ. Your enemies are ever near; here is Christ's promise to strengthen you for that fight, to prepare you to overcome in the struggle against sin and Satan. And what strength it gives! You leave here with the peace of Christ. You leave here with God's forgiveness, sealed and delivered in the body and blood of Christ. You leave here, renewed as God's child, part of His family.

Come then, to this new meal. Come often, as Christ here offers His treasures that are always new, as Christ bids you come to rest in Him, to know His peace, to receive the blessings granted to His family. Come, dear child of God, that your heavenly Father might here embrace you with His love, His peace, and His forgiveness. And leave in peace; leave with God's

strength made yours anew. Leave in the peace that flows from sins forgiven, the peace known only to those reconciled to their God, washed clean and pure in the blood of the Lamb.

Ponder anew your Savior's wondrous love! This meal is what He leaves to His Church. Here is His new covenant; His testament to you. As He leaves to meet His death, this is what He leaves to us. What love beyond all telling! Your Savior's care and concern is always for you: in setting up this meal, in coming here and now to you through this meal; in leaving the upper room that same night to meet His betrayer in Gethsemane. We must walk this way of His love with Him, journeying on through these three days, walking again to dark Gethsemane, following to the judgment hall, climbing Calvary's mournful mountain, and finally hastening early to the tomb. We go on this way—to see our Savior die for OUR sins; to see OUR deliverance won. This is the Savior we remember in His meal—the one who dies and rises for us! The one whose love for you is without depth or measure, beyond all telling. This is the Savior who invites us, His family, to share His meal with us, until we enjoy the unending feast with Him in heaven.

Amen.