

SERMON: “Words of Hope: *I Believe in the Forgiveness of Sins.*”

Rev. Geoff Ross. Maundy Thursday, April 13, 2017. St. Andrew’s, Brampton.

[Invitation] Jesus and His disciples were anxious to celebrate Passover, but they needed a place to have this special meal – a room somewhere, big enough for all of them, safe enough for them to be alone. As faithful Jews they observed the religious festivals and fasts – but they were far from home so there were details to be worked out as best they could. On the first day of the festival of Unleavened Bread – the day, we’re told, the Passover lamb is sacrificed – Jesus sends Peter and John out to find a place so they could prepare the meal.

Now like any special meal, the Passover meal has its traditions – its fixed menu – but this meal was more than just a meal, it is also a worship service that remembers the most important event in the history of the People of Israel/God. Passover is called the “feast of freedom” because it celebrates the deliverance of the Israelites from their salvation from slavery and death in Egypt. It also memorializes the night when the faithful were protected by the blood of a sacrificed ‘spotless,’ male lamb that was put on the door frame of their houses – representing the Hebrew letter ‘chet’ which is the short form of the word “life.” (This was the night of the final plague brought down on the Pharaoh and Egypt – the one that would take the life of all of the 1st born males.) As instructed by God the Israelites roasted the lamb and ate it with unleavened bread (matzah) and bitter herbs – it was eaten in haste so they would be ready to leave quickly. As the meal was being eaten the Angel of God “passed over” the houses with the blood of the lamb – the sign of “life” – sparing/saving them.

After that night, God commanded that the People eat this meal annually as a reminder of their deliverance and of what God had done for them by fulfilling the promises God had made to them through Moses, “*I am the Lord, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians.*” These promises are remembered with four glasses of wine known as the Cup of Sanctification, the Cup of Deliverance, the Cup of Redemption, and the Cup of Restoration. Wine is used to symbolize the blood of the lamb that formed the Covenant between God and the People of God. Once the meal was ready, they followed the traditions that they grew up with; with Jesus leading the celebration saying; “*I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.*” (Luke 22:15)

[Before Woff] Everything went as it should until the it came time to tell the story of deliverance – a story that Jesus used to remind His disciples of God’s power, grace, and promises. After He passed the food among them Jesus began to reveal to them the mystery of God’s plan of redemption. Using the same Passover words that they had always used He began to speak of a new covenant – the fulfillment of the promises of the old Covenant – that would be brought about through Him, Him and His blood and body. Using the story of the “Pesach” – the Passover lamb – and the Cup of Redemption as the example of God’s saving

power and grace, Jesus said that He was the new Lamb of God, that He would have to die, and that His blood would bring about their redemption through the forgiveness of their sins.

For Lent we've been exploring the Apostles' Creed and I have stressed the fact that the Creed **IS** what we believe – that it is **THE** defining, defiant, and defending document of our faith. As both Rebekah and I have said, while not Biblical in the strictest sense, it is wholly founded on scripture and the teachings of Jesus/God as found in scripture. As we have seen, the Creed is a statement that deals with the whole of the arc of salvation. Starting with an affirmation of God as a God of grace – grace revealed in/through “*Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord*”, that the second Statement makes clear came to be-with us to die for us; we moved to the third Statement that focuses on the ongoing role of the Holy Spirit and brings us to us, the Body of Christ – the Church. Today's phrase – “I believe in the forgiveness of sins” – is driven home by both Jesus' physical and spiritual actions, actions that He turned into commandments

At the Cup of Redemption – He gave thanks to God and then said; “*Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.*” By doing this Jesus claimed that He was the ‘lamb’ slaughtered so His blood would be the sign that would save God's people – by having God's judgment pass over them. Along with the Cups and the “*Pesakh*” – the Passover Lamb – the other main element of the Passover meal is the *Matzh*, or unleavened bread, symbolizing the ‘bread of life’ that God gave the People in the wilderness. This is the bread that Jesus blessed and broke and gave to the disciples, saying, “*Take, eat; this is my body*”, turning the Matzh into His body broken for us to give us new life. No longer would God's believers emphasize their deliverance from Egypt. Instead, they would celebrate a spiritual freedom, a deliverance from death and hell, and the promise of eternal life. For the disciples who had heard Jesus over and over again claim that He came to fulfill both the law and promises of God; by ‘completing’ the old covenant and offering Himself as a new covenant, Jesus kept His word.

[After Communion] Having forgiven them He got up and showed them what it would take to forgive others. The Gospel of John tells us that during the meal Jesus got up and took off His tunic, wrapped a towel around His waist, and began to wash the disciple's feet. Rooted in another ancient Judaic tradition, that of the ritual washing one's feet, hands, body to ‘purify’ oneself prior to worship – or a ritual meal. But this was more than just a ritual; it was a teaching moment. By turning this ritual physical ablution into an act of spiritual absolution, Jesus, having just claimed to be the Lamb of God whose blood would “*wash away the sins of the world*” Jesus then offered to His disciples a tangible sign of their being ‘washed clean’ by getting up and stooping down to wash their feet, wiping away – forgiving – their sins. The commandment to love one another comes right after Jesus washes the disciple's feet connecting the act of forgiveness, the freeing from sin/guilt/blame, and the saving power of love. The forgiveness of sins is an ongoing process – one that will bring about the Kingdom. This is our hope; it is also our calling: to be a community that believes in the forgiveness of sins. Amen.