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RESURRECTION  
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## **Communion, Cleansing & Commissioning *St. John's Vision for the Lord's Supper***

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On this Maundy Thursday, we are gathered to remember what happened this night in Jerusalem long ago. The events of Maundy Thursday are so rich in symbolism that we could not exhaust their meaning, even if this were the only thing we talked about all year. In the Prologue to his Gospel, John introduces Jesus as the God-man, the Word made flesh; now, in the dramatic actions of this evening, we witness what John meant. This night, Jesus vividly demonstrates in countless ways that he is indeed the Word made flesh.

Take, for example, the foot washing (which we will remember as a special observance during tonight's service). Who among us would do such a thing, knowing that we have only a few hours remaining before being arrested, tortured and killed? Yet in John 13, Jesus, as the master of ceremonies, arises from dinner, strips down to his undergarments, wraps himself in a towel, and then washes the filth off his disciples' feet. If it were me, I would be a nervous wreck. I wouldn't care in the slightest whether my disciples' feet were dirty. Who else but God incarnate would so consistently puts the needs of others before his own that he even cares for them at the hour of his death?

Or consider the betrayal of Judas. Jesus knows who will betray him, yet he doesn't interfere. Instead, he washes Judas' feet just the same as the other eleven disciples. And then Jesus gives Judas a morsel of bread, bread that Jesus had said was his body, given for them. Then Judas immediately goes out into the darkness to double cross him. Who else but God incarnate could show such amazing grace even to his enemy and betrayer?

Or consider Jesus' vigil in the garden. Who among us would have the composure to kneel and pray for hours with a lynch mob on the way? We all know the compulsive power of the sympathetic nervous system's "fight or flight" response. Horror films play on this primal instinct to run from danger. As the monster approaches its unsuspecting victims, viewers scream, "Look out! Run for your life!" But in this case, Jesus already knows what's coming! He knows what they will do to him! Yet he remains still in the garden, waiting for the serpent to strike. Who else but God incarnate would choose neither fight nor flight but prayer in the face of certain danger?

But perhaps the most vivid demonstration that Jesus is the Word made flesh is the event that ties all these other elements together, namely the supper itself. What follows is a meditation on the meal as it is found in the Gospel of John, followed by an invitation to put it into practice.

Of all four Gospels, it is John's Gospel that talks most about food and drink—from Jesus' first miracle at a wedding feast in which he turned water into wine all the way through to the last chapter. One reason for John's emphasis is theological, as he intends to show how Jesus fulfills the great feasts of the Jewish people. Almost every major event that occurs in John's Gospel is somehow situated within a feast, whether the sabbath, or Passover, or Tabernacles, or Hanukah. If there were more time, we could read through John's Gospel and see the ways that Jesus completes every feast. John's contention is that Jesus is the reason why every feast was instituted in the first place. Up until Jesus, all of the old feasts had been occasions to pause and remember the ways that God had provided for his people in history. But John picks up the telescope and looks through it from the opposite end to show us how the old stories of provision and deliverance were merely foretastes of the ultimate salvation God would bring through Jesus, the Word made flesh. In any case, for our purposes this evening, let us simply agree that food and drink play a very important role in John's Gospel.

When we come to John's Maundy Thursday passage in chapter 13, the reason Jesus and his disciples gather upstairs at a house in Jerusalem on this particular night is so that they might share in a meal. John tells us that it is "during supper" (v. 2) that Jesus arises "from supper" (v. 4) to wash the disciples' feet. The supper is central to all four Gospel accounts of Jesus' actions this evening. And it is this supper that has been a central feature of Christian worship ever since. It's often called the Last Supper, but as we'll see that's only partially true.

This meal is indeed the last *supper* in John's Gospel, but it's not the last *meal*. In John 21, in the final episode of the Gospel, we read about the very first Easter brunch. The risen Lord Jesus hosts a fish fry for Peter and John and the others on the beach at the Sea of Galilee. It's evidence of Jesus' physicality; he's not a ghost. Ghosts don't cook breakfast, nor do they eat it. But there's more going on here than mere proof that Jesus physically rose from the dead. John ends with an Easter brunch because of what Jesus' resurrection means for the greater story being told in the entirety of the Bible. Jesus' resurrection is the first fruits of the New Creation, which is the long-awaited climactic ending to God's grand story of redemption. John knows that he is telling the beginning of the ending of the whole Bible story. The reason why food and drink are so important in John's Gospel is because they play such an important role throughout the Bible. Thus, knowing that he is writing one of the Bible's final chapters, John is eager to report that Jesus didn't simply meet his disciples on the beach, but they ate and drank together. It's a very, very important detail.

If we go back to the very beginning—not the beginning of John’s Gospel, but the beginning of the whole story—back to Creation in Genesis 1, we find “second only to the direction to propagate and have dominion over the earth... is God’s instruction to [mankind] to eat...<sup>1</sup> In Gen 1:29, God says, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food.” Alexander Schmemmann writes that before mankind fell in to sin and death, there was never any division between the material and the spiritual. God blessed everything that he created, which means that everything—including food and drink—was “the sign and means of His presence.” Consequently, all food and drink was given to mankind by God, for communion *with* God.<sup>2</sup>

But then came the Fall, when our first parents ate the one thing in the Garden that “was not offered as a gift to [mankind]. Not given, not blessed by God, it was food whose eating was condemned to be communion with itself alone, and not with God.”<sup>3</sup> For the first time in history, mankind ate in isolation from God. Food and drink became ends unto themselves, rather than the means for communion with God.

From that point on in the Bible, food and drink are seen in two very different lights. On the one hand, there are those who follow in the way of the serpent: they eat and drink to escape. They hoard food as survivors, on their own apart from God. They drink to excess in order to drown the sorrows of their broken world.

On the other hand, there are those who eat and drink as believers, trusting in God’s deliverance. First it’s bread and wine and a sacrificial animal, prepared and shared together with God at a makeshift altar, e.g. after Noah’s salvation in the ark, then after Abraham reaches Canaan, and then on down through the generations, until Jacob’s descendants are enslaved in Egypt.

Next comes the Passover meal. The Hebrews eat roasted lamb, but not before collecting its blood and spreading it on their doorposts to cover and protect their households from the angel of death. Because of this sacred meal, God’s people escape from bondage and death.

Then in the wilderness, under Moses’ leadership, God provides his people with a way to commune with him once again as they did in Eden. While they remain in the wilderness, it will be the portable Tabernacle. When they arrive in the Promised Land, it will become the permanent Temple. Both follow the same pattern: a holy intersection where heaven and earth meet. From this point on, God’s people have a place to eat and drink with him like they did in the beginning, in the Garden, before the Fall. If you think of the Temple primarily as a place of prayer and praise, with signs on the door saying “No Food or Drink,” then you’re profoundly

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, second edition (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1973) 11.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

mistaken. Because more than anything else, the Temple was for feasting. In fact, that's why so much of John's Gospel story happens in and around the Temple: three times a year, Jews went back to Jerusalem to celebrate the great feasts.

John knows that Easter brunch on the beach with the risen Lord Jesus marks the ground-breaking *beginning* of construction on the New Creation. It is the long-awaited *dawn* to the climactic ending to the story of the Bible. If we were to skip ahead to the very end of the Bible (Rev 19-22), we would see the New Creation at its *completion*. Heaven and earth will be reunited in full. There will no longer be any temple, because God will dwell with his people, and he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more. Everyone there will share in the real Last Supper, the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, which will go on forever as we eat the fruit of the tree of life, and we drink from the river of the water of life, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, right down the streets of the city.

In summary, the grand story of the Bible is the backdrop for making sense of Jesus' meal with the disciples on Maundy Thursday:

1. Creation. All food and drink was given to mankind *by* God, for communion *with* God.
2. Fall. Humanity eats and drinks in isolation, apart from God.
3. Redemption. (We will see momentarily how Maundy Thursday fits in.)
4. Consummation. The renewal of all things, when "we will feast in the house of Zion; we will sing with our hearts restored. "He has done great things," we will say together. We will feast and weep no more."<sup>4</sup>

**B**ecause food and drink are essential to the grand story of the Bible, and because food and drink are so important in John's Gospel, we have every reason to expect that food and drink will be central to John's account of Maundy Thursday. But in fact, that's not the case. Apart from mentioning that the foot washing occurred during supper, and that Jesus' betrayer was the one with whom he shared his bread, John 13 tells us nothing else about the last supper. Why?

Two reasons. First, John's Gospel was the last of the four to be written, and he wrote it assuming that his readers would already be familiar with the other three Gospels. So, for example, John skips many important details—like Jesus' baptism and temptation and the transfiguration and the details of the last supper—not because he doesn't consider those details to be important, but because he expects his readers to already know them through Matthew, Mark and Luke. Instead, John provides new information about what is otherwise a very familiar story. In chapter 13, for example, he describes the foot washing, something the other evangelists don't mention. Why? Because John assumes that his readers have already heard the institution of the Lord's Supper in Matthew, Mark and Luke.

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<sup>4</sup> Sandra McCracken, "We Will Feast in the House of Zion," from the album, *Psalms*.

But there's also a second and more important reason why John doesn't go into detail in his description of the supper. It's because of John's emphasis on Jesus' fulfillment of the great Jewish feasts. Even though John certainly remembers Jesus' observance of Passover with the disciples during this evening's meal, John doesn't want to distract readers from the climactic fulfillment of the Passover Feast that happens on Good Friday.

When Jesus first appeared in John's Gospel, John the Baptist saw him coming and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (1:29). The next day, John the Baptist said it again, and those who believed followed the Lamb. From that point forward, John's story builds toward the grand finale of Good Friday. In their accounts of the last supper, Matthew, Mark and Luke all look back to the Passover in Egypt, remembering what happened that night when God delivered his people from slavery. They all describe Jesus' deliverance as a second Passover for the people of God. John, on the other hand, looks through the telescope the other way. He sees Jesus as the quintessential Passover lamb. Lifted up on the cross for all the world to see, Jesus is the true Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The blood that pours from his side covers over all who believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. All deliverance from sin, bondage and death ultimately flows from the blood of Jesus, the one, true Passover Lamb.

**S**o then, down to brass tacks. What does John want for us to believe and to do in response to his account of Maundy Thursday? Is John contradicting Matthew, Mark and Luke? Is his point that the Lord's Supper actually isn't important? Since Jesus fulfilled Passover as the Lamb of God, is John arguing that we need not celebrate the Lord's Supper together? No! John's aim is precisely the opposite. He doesn't want to rob the Lord's Supper of value, but rather to add to its importance and meaning through his additional details. He intends to help us make connections that will increase our appreciation of the significance of this night. John intends to make this an even greater Eucharist (i.e. thanksgiving) because of all that the supper represents. By making us even more thankful, he hopes to empower us to live more joyfully and faithfully as those who believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (John 20:30-31).

In closing, then, let's consider three of the many ways that John's account adds life and meaning to our experience of the Lord's Supper. These are **communion**, **cleansing**, and **commissioning**.

First, **communion**. From what we've seen as John's overarching purpose in his Gospel, we can say with confidence that the Lord's Supper is truly communion with God. Of all the food and drink that we may consume throughout the week, perhaps sometimes merely to survive, perhaps sometimes in order to escape, perhaps sometimes for relationship with others, here at least is one time when we know that we are connecting. This meal is not an end unto itself, but instead is given *by* God, for the purpose of communion *with* God. (And hopefully it does shape the way that we share meals with one another throughout the week.) Furthermore, this feast encapsulates Jesus' fulfillment of all the feasts of the Old Testament. And because Jesus is the Temple of God, and wherever two or three are gathered Jesus is there with us, then this meal

that we share together with him is the ultimate temple meal. But, as we have seen, it's not at all the *Last Supper*. Instead, it's hors d'oeuvres with the bridegroom before the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. It's an early harvest in the New Creation, in communion with the King who is making all things new. The risen Lord Jesus welcomes us into his presence. When we gather at his table, we share in communion with him.

Second, **cleansing**. From the foot washing in John 13, I believe that John would want for us to see Jesus' cleansing and renewal at work in the supper that he gave us. The early church regularly practiced baptism and the Lord's Supper in their worship, but there's very little evidence for foot washing as a liturgical practice.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, John would have us remember the foot washing as part of the meal that Jesus shared with his disciples that evening. As Jesus washed their feet, he spoke of their need to be made clean. He said, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me" (13:8). Yet "the one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean" (13:10). If there were time to go back to John 3 and read Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, we would see that Jesus' remarks here about cleansing are a continuation of his prior teaching on the sacrament of baptism. Thus, what Jesus is saying in John 13 is that those who have been baptized are clean. Christian believers don't need to be baptized over and over again. Nevertheless, in every day life, as followers of Jesus, believers do walk through a lot of filth. Believers do need their feet washed again and again. So I think John would have us associate *cleansing* with this meal that we share together.

One way to think about this cleansing would be as a regular renewal of our baptismal vows. Here's a simple way to understand how the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper go together. Baptism signifies birth, and the Lord's Supper signifies nourishment. You cannot eat until you have been born. However, once you have been born, then you need to eat. Regularly! And every time you eat, your eating is concrete proof that you have been born! By analogy, the church prohibits people from eating the Lord's Supper before they have been baptized, for the simple reason that you cannot eat until you have been born. But once you've been baptized, you need to eat the Lord's Supper. Regularly! And every time you eat the Lord's Supper, your eating is concrete proof that you were baptized, i.e. born again! That alone is a kind of renewal of our baptism. But how much more are we renewed if every time we share in the Lord's Supper, we remember the foot washing! Whenever we eat of it, we can expect the Lord to get up during dinner, wrap himself with a towel, and wash away the grime. That's what he does for us. He cleanses us again and again.<sup>6</sup> Sharing in the Lord's Supper is a visible sign of the cleansing and renewal that Jesus gives us each time we commune with him.

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<sup>5</sup> I'm not saying that early Christians didn't practice foot washing; in fact, there's a lot of evidence that they did. But for the most part, foot washing remained a form of every day hospitality rather than becoming a liturgical and sacramental act (except as it came to be practiced on Maundy Thursday).

<sup>6</sup> If you would prefer a different metaphor of renewal, every week as we set our hope on the risen Christ, we send all our problems, all our difficulties, and all the devil's works to the cross.

Finally, **commissioning**. As we receive the sacrificial love of the Word made flesh, we are commissioned to turn and share that love with one another. After washing everyone's feet (including Judas), Jesus says, "I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them" (13:15-17). This is how Jesus commissions his disciples during the Lord's Supper. It's a monumental command, isn't it? We're now to pivot and love our brothers and sisters in the same way that Jesus has loved us. Jesus goes on to say, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (13:34-35). If this were the only thing that Jesus asked of us, it would be more than enough to keep us busy for the rest of our lives. We are to humble ourselves and serve one another. We are to arise from supper and cleanse the filth from each others' feet—even those whom we know have or will betray us. We are to love one another as Christ loved the church. Whenever we decide to partake of the Lord's Supper, we ought to take a good look around, because the blessings of *communion* and *cleansing* are given to us so that we might obey this new commandment to love those who partake of the supper with us. Having eaten his body, and drunk his blood, we are now to love one another with his love. That's the responsibility we choose to accept whenever we come to the table. What a weighty responsibility it is!

Yet we mustn't despair. Jesus' burden is easy, and his yoke is light! Remember whose meal this is! It is the supper of the risen Lord Jesus, who poured out his Spirit on all believers. The power of his resurrection is already ours, enabling us to love as we never could have imagined.

The bread and the wine that we share together are not mere symbols. They are all the food and drink we require in order to love one another as he loved us.