

17 April 2003  
Maundy Thursday

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

## Jesu Juva

“Feast of Life”

(Exodus 24:3-11; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; Mark 14:12-26)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

I love the reading we heard this evening from Exodus, because even though it happened a long time ago, it is at the same time so *contemporary*. It is so “just like us!” For consider what is happening that reading:

First, the people of Israel are chosen by God and rescued from their slavery in Egypt, the culmination of that rescue being their passing through the waters of the Red Sea, which, the New Testament tells us, is their **baptism**. (1 Cor. 10:2)

Next, when they get to Mt. Sinai, and they are **catechized**, for we read that “*Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord.*” He taught them.

And so once they are taught, what happens next? They speak their **confirmation** vow: “*All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do.*” Kind of like us when, in the rite of confirmation, we are asked, “*Do you intend to continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it?*” And we promise to do so.

And then, on the basis – not of their vow! – but of the covenant that God establishes with His people by means of the blood sprinkled on the altar and then on the people, what finally happens? They eat and drink with God. They **commune** with God.

Do you see the pattern? Something very much like that is what still happens among the people of God in the church today! First, God chooses us and rescues us from our slavery to sin, and we are **baptized** into our Lord Jesus Christ. Then we are **catechized**, or taught the words of the Lord. And once we are taught, we speak our **confirmation** vow. And then on the basis – not of our vow! – but of the new covenant, the *new Testament*, established by God with the blood of His Son, what happens? We eat and drink with God. We have **Holy Communion** with God!

Now, what happened on Mt. Sinai is not the exact same thing that happens in our churches. The *pattern* is the same, but what happened on Mt. Sinai with the blood of animals was only the picture, or a pointer to the reality of what would happen later on Mt. Calvary. For on Calvary, it would not be the blood of animals, but the blood of the Son of God which would be shed to establish the *new* Testament of God with His people. It would be the blood of the Son of God which would be shed for the life of the world. And when that happened, things would never be the same again.

And that is what we are celebrating and commemorating this night – that what happened with Jesus in the upper room with His disciples when He gave the gift of His Supper, was the establishment of God’s *new* Testament. The picture, the pointer from Mt. Sinai is completed and fulfilled by Jesus, the Son of God, as He eat and drinks with His people, and feeds them the food of the new Testament – His own body and blood. What happens with Jesus is not simply a picture, or a pointer, or a memorial as it was at Mt. Sinai – what happens with Jesus is the fulfillment, the *reality*. . . . And that means that for you and I, who are gathered as the people of God in this place, what continues to happen here at this altar, as Jesus comes to feed us, is also no picture, or pointer, or simple memorial, but the real thing, the reality. Here, still today, the Son of God comes to feed His people with the food of the new Testament – His own body and blood.

Now that’s hard for some people to accept and understand, because frankly, *memorials* are easier for us to understand. After all, we have a lot of memorials in our country, and how many right across the river in DC? But the Lord’s Supper is not just a memorial, and its important and good that its not! For what happens at a memorial? We think back to a moment in history. We dig into our memory about an event from the past. Perhaps we reminisce. But all the doing is done by us. The memorial doesn’t do anything – its just there. . . . But here in the Lord’s Supper, in Holy Communion, we have something much different. We have not just a picture or a memorial, but the reality. Jesus is here for you. His body and blood are here for you. We are really and actually in the presence of God and eat and drink with Him. As we heard read twice earlier, Jesus said: ***“This is my body . . . This is my blood.”*** And Jesus said what He meant, and meant what He said.

And that is not only important for us, that is good for us! Because it means that the benefits that we here receive in Holy Communion – the forgiveness of our sins, life, and salvation – do not depend on us and what we do; on our ability to remember, or reminisce good enough. No, the benefits depend solely on God and what He does. And why is that good? Well think back to the beginning of this sermon and the “confirmation vows” I mentioned. The people of Israel that day at Mt. Sinai said, ***“All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do.”*** And standing before God’s altar we say, *“We intend to continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than*

*fall away from it.” . . .* But how long did it take Israel to break its vow? And how steadfast have we been? What if our standing before God, and receiving His blessings really depended on our keeping our vows? Then where would we be?

And so God did not leave it up to us. He did not simply establish a memorial here for us, and tell us to gather together to think about all that He has done for us in the past. No! In Holy Communion, we don't just think about the past, He brings the past to us. He brings the cross of Calvary here to us, transcending time and space, and makes us not just rememberers, but *participants*. But it is not our work, but His work. It is not our remembering, but His remembering. It is not our thoughts journeying back in time, but His journey to us. For He is the One who came to us, and comes to us still. From His body in a manger of hay to His body in a manger of bread. From His blood poured out on a cross to His blood poured out in a chalice. And that true body and blood, given *personally* and *individually* to you and me, makes all the difference in the world. Because it is real, and it is powerful. It forgives sins, it gives life, and promises eternal salvation to all who believe.

And we need that personal touch – in the individual absolution, in Holy Communion – because as I mentioned in the sermon this past Sunday, no article of faith is as hard to believe as the forgiveness of sins. It sounds too good to be true. . . . But God wants you to know and be sure – absolutely sure – that he has saved you, and forgiven you, and wants you to have no doubts. And so here He gives you His pledge, He gives you His very body and blood, He gives you forgiveness one-on-one, because it is **for you**. Or think of it this way: which would you rather receive – a third-class, bulk mail, flyer addressed to “occupant,” or a first-class, personal letter address specifically to you? . . .

This is **for you**. The New Testament in Jesus' blood. And here, as you eat the body and drink the blood of your Lord Jesus Christ, you become one with Him – His flesh in your flesh, His blood now running through your veins. And you have the most intimate communion with Him. There is no way on earth to get closer to Him than this. And now joined with your Saviour Jesus Christ, as you live in Him and He in you, His Father calls you His child, and we call His Father our Father. And you have a new life. We who are “dying to live” are given a new life to live. For joined to Christ we die to sin with Him in His death on the cross, and then we rise with Him in His resurrection from the dead to live a new life. . . . Joined together with Christ, that's the *reality* in which we now live.

The Early Church, in trying to communicate this reality, used the picture of a **pelican** to represent Christ. Now, if you've ever seen a pelican, its kind of a goofy looking bird – it doesn't walk or fly very well, and it dives into the water to catch fish even worse! And isn't that how many people thought of Jesus, as He walked and lived on earth – they

really didn't think very much of Him. . . . But that's not why they chose the pelican as a symbol for Christ. It was rather for this reason: that in times of great need and hunger, a pelican mother will sacrifice herself for her children. She will tear open her own breast and let her babies feed on her flesh and blood, rather than have them die. . . . And that is what Christ has done for us. In our great need and hunger for forgiveness, life, and salvation, He allowed Himself to be torn open on the cross, and has us feed on Him rather than die. And as we come to His Table here, and eat and drink His body and blood, that is the *reality* here present. And we who are dying to live, are given life, in Christ.

So hear His words again this night, and believe. And believing, come and receive, His body and blood, His forgiveness, His life, and His salvation. *And this eating and drink of your Lord's true body and blood will keep and preserve your faith steadfast, unto everlasting life.* And filled with His gifts, *depart in His peace.*

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*(Nicene Creed, beginning on p. 166)*