

28 March 2013
Holy Maundy Thursday

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“A New Covenant”

Text: Luke 22:7-20; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 10:15-25

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

All three of the readings we heard tonight focused on one theme: a new covenant. A new covenant to replace the old covenant. Not that the old covenant didn't work - it was fine. It was given by God and all that God gives is good. So it was fine; we were the problem. We couldn't keep it. It was **my covenant that they broke**, God said through the prophet Jeremiah. So the old covenant was broken. But it didn't need fixing - it needed replacing. We needed a new covenant.

Which was no surprise to God. It wasn't that the old covenant was “plan A” and then when that didn't work out, God had to scramble and hatch “plan B” - a *new* covenant. Actually, if we're going to talk that way, it was really the other way around. The new covenant, Jesus, was plan A. Always was. The Scriptures tell us that Jesus was foreknown and chosen before the foundation of the world (cf. 1 Peter 1:19-20). God knew. He knew what He would do. And so in time, from the moment of the very first sin that plunged our world into darkness, sin, death, and separation from God, Jesus was “plan A” to put things right again.

Now, why didn't the Father just send His Son into the world right then and there and not wait? That's what Eve was expecting, at least. When Cain was born, she exclaimed, “*I have gotten a man, the Lord!*” God had promised a Saviour would be born from her, and so the first son that popped out, she expected a Saviour! That's faith. Faith in the words and promises of God.

But no, Eve; not yet. Why not? Well, God isn't big into answering our “why” questions. He tells us instead to have faith; not to worry about the *why*, but to believe that He knows what He's doing. We hear later that when He did send His Son, when Jesus was born, it was “*just the right time*” (Galatians 4:4). Which means that until then, it wasn't the right time. Not yet.

And so until it was, God established the old covenant. It was never meant to last forever; it was never meant to be His final word - that, as I said, was Jesus. The old covenant was temporary; it was for a time only (as Paul explains in Galatians). It was put in place only until Jesus would come (Gal 3:19). It was put there, in fact, to

serve Him, to point to Him, to foreshadow Him; to keep His people until He would come. It was a *guardian* (Gal 3:24), Paul calls it.

And so what Jeremiah did was point the people forward. Things weren't going too well for them. But the days are coming, He said, when God will act. A new covenant is coming; unlike the old one, which they broke.

So, what would this new covenant be that we would be unable to break? It would be *an entirely one-sided covenant*. It would all be done by God. And if all done by Him, then done perfectly and unbreakably. It wouldn't depend on sinful, human priests, but a perfect, heavenly priest. It wouldn't be the blood of animals, but the blood of God. It wouldn't be offered time after time, but once and for all - after this sacrifice, there ***"is no longer any offering for sin."*** For no more would be needed; no more need be done. And it wouldn't forgive some sins, but all sins - every single one, from the least to the greatest, from the beginning of time to the end of time. It would be and be done by Jesus.

So on the night when He was betrayed, when Jesus took the cup and told His disciples: ***this cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood*** - the moment was here. God was now doing what He had planned all along, from the very beginning. A covenant only He could do. A covenant only He *would* do. A covenant that He would do *alone*. Therefore a "testament," as Luther translated the word. Something one does alone and puts into place, and then when the maker dies, it is simply received by the heirs.

And so now is the time. The time has come for Jesus to die and put into effect His testament. To offer Himself as the perfect sacrifice for the sin of the world. This is the day God had planned all along, and now it was coming to pass. A new covenant, not like the old. A new covenant that cannot be broken and that will last forever. A new covenant where God will ***"forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more."*** For in Jesus, all our sin will be atoned for. Forgiven. Gone.

But not only the "what," but also the "how" has now changed for us. In the reading from Hebrews tonight we heard: ***"Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh . . ."***

Now, that may not have sounded strange to you, but to those who first heard those words, there was something in there that would have stopped them in their tracks: ***holy places***. Plural. That wasn't right; that couldn't be right! There was only one holy place. Only one place where offerings and sacrifices could be made. One temple, one ark, one altar, one place God had promised to be and commanded this all to take place - and that was in Jerusalem. For the old covenant, you had to go

there. No exceptions.

But now, Hebrews tells us, in the new covenant, it is different. There is not just one holy place, but *many* holy places. For in this new covenant, we don't go to the holy place - *now, the holy place comes to us*. It is wherever Christ is and whenever His words are spoken and the once and for all sacrifice is given to us. And so there is not one, but now *many* holy places. Where the Lamb of God, given for us, is given to us. The Lamb of God which makes the place holy. The Lamb of God that makes us holy with the forgiveness of our sin. The Lamb of God whose Body and Blood are here given us to eat and to drink. This is the new covenant, done by Him, now given to you. All Jesus. A covenant that cannot be broken.

So what do we do? We believe it, we receive it, and we live in it. We now, as we heard in Hebrews: ***live in love and good works***. We don't do the covenant; we don't do anything in it. We don't make a decision, pray a prayer, offer sacrifices, or do anything else for the forgiveness of our sins. That's done. One and done, by Jesus. All Jesus. Only Jesus.

But it is done *for us*. Tonight isn't just about bread and wine being changed, it's about *you* being changed by this gift. That having having received this gift, those promises, and the covenant, we live in it. We live as those washed clean of the filth of our sins. We live as those who have received the Body and Blood of Christ. We live as those who have participated in the passover, for in Christ, in truth, we *have* passed over from death to life. When Adam sinned, he passed over from life to death. Now, Jesus has reversed that. Just as God had promised.

So tonight, Jesus said to His disciples: *take and eat, take and drink*. This is the new covenant in my blood. The new covenant that fulfills and does away with the old. The new covenant that forgives sins and remembers iniquity no more. The new covenant which cannot be broken.

And tonight, Jesus says to you: *take and eat, take and drink*. That you too receive the new covenant. That you too receive the Lamb of God, given for you. That you too be heirs of His testament and inheritors of His life, everlasting life. And so we will receive Him this night - Him, and all that He is, and all that He has.

As we do so, we do so now in the context of this Holy Week, when we remember the fulfilling of God's promise, when the Lamb goes to the altar of the cross, when our great High Priest offers Himself, with the sin of the world upon Him - only Him. All this *for you*. Jesus for you. This is the new covenant. What God had planned all along. So come and receive it. Come and receive Him. And go live in the confidence that what Jesus has done cannot be broken. **Yes, your sins are forgiven. You have peace with God.**

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