



THE EPICENTER OF HISTORY

*Jeff Peabody
New Day Church
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It's been a few years since we've had a big earthquake here in Seattle. Do you remember the last one? Do you remember where you were?

Karin and I were in college down in California during what was called the Whittier Earthquake. It was a big one, and we were right near the epicenter. I was walking in a parking lot on campus. There was student housing on my left and cars on my right. And the first thing I remembered was the sound, as all the windows in the dorms started rattling and vibrating. Then I looked to my right and all the cars were bouncing on all fours.

That's the only time I've been that close to the middle of an earthquake, or what's called the epicenter. Technically, the epicenter isn't the center of an earthquake – it's the point on the earth's surface directly above it. Something is going on below, and the epicenter is the point where it all becomes visible.

Did you know history has a center? Chronologically it may not be the middle, but from God's perspective, all of time revolves around the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The cross casts a shadow backward and forward and is the crucial moment in history.

That's the center. I would call the Lord's Supper or communion the epicenter, because it's the marker we can point to that is visible on the surface. Communion is not the thing itself -- it represents something deeper. But the closer we get to the epicenter, the more we know and understand what the Lord's Supper is all about, the more we will be shaken by the deeper reality of Christ's death for us.

We don't spend much time talking about communion and its meaning, even though we observe it once a month. This morning I wanted to slow down the experience a little, to look at it more closely and see just how it relates to history.

Luke 22:7-24

Then came the day of Unleavened Bread on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and make preparations for us to eat the Passover."

"Where do you want us to prepare for it?" they asked.

He replied, "As you enter the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him to the house that he enters, and say to the owner of the house, 'The Teacher asks: Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large upper room, all furnished. Make preparations there."

They left and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover.

When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God."

After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, "Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes."

And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me."

In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. But the hand of him who is going to betray me is with mine on the table. The Son of Man will go as it has been decreed, but woe to that man who betrays him." They began to question among themselves which of them it might be who would do this.

Also a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest.

This morning what I would like to do is consider the Lord's Supper's place in history – past, present and future. It's inseparable from all three – it connects what's behind us with what's ahead.

Let's begin by talking about the past. It would be very difficult to make any sense of the Lord's Supper apart from Israel's history. Look at the first verse we read:

Then came the day of Unleavened Bread on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed.

A Jewish holiday is the backdrop for the events that are about to unfold. It was no coincidence that Jesus chose the beginning of Passover as the time to share one last meal with his friends. He had a message he wanted to burn into their memories, and he did it by associating it with a story they already knew. It was an ancient story, one from the very early days of Israel.

Jesus chose the day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. He did that because he wanted the disciples and us to realize that the past was

foreshadowing his coming. **The Lord's Supper reminds us that the past was PREPARING the world for God's salvation.**

Chronological events – events that happen in a sequence over time -- are connected. Christ's death didn't occur in a vacuum – history had been working toward that moment, setting the stage for it to happen.

Let's revisit the story of Passover briefly that was the prequel to the Last Supper. The Israelites were slaves in Egypt for 400 years and God was about to deliver them. He had sent all these plagues against Egypt, none of which were enough to cause Pharaoh to let them go. So finally God sent the angel of death to strike down every firstborn son in the land.

Exodus 12

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in Egypt, "This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year. Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household... Take care of them until the fourteenth day of the month, when all the people of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight. Then they are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses where they eat the lambs... This is how you are to eat it: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the LORD's Passover.

"On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn — both men and animals — and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt.

Jesus was drawing parallels between Passover and his own death. History had set the stage well. Up until this point, the disciples had probably always just thought of the Passover celebration as a piece of their national pride. But God was using it to prepare a story.

Egypt represents the sinfulness that holds us all as slaves. And as many ways as we might try, it doesn't want to let go. Just like with Pharaoh, it takes something very big and bold to set us free – it takes a death.

Hebrews 9:22

...without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

For the Israelites on that first Passover, it was the lamb that provided the blood. It had to be a lamb with no defects. Of course, that gives us a natural picture of Jesus. Even this morning we sang about Jesus being the Lamb of God. His death on our behalf made him the sacrifice that saves our lives. And just like the Israelites were spared when they

placed the blood of the lamb on their doorposts, when we claim the blood of Christ, God spares us, his judgment passes over us.

History anticipated the arrival of Jesus. Jesus chose the Passover as the most specific and obvious parallel, but you'll find others throughout the Old Testament – miniature pictures of how God would one day rescue humanity. He also prepared the way through the messages of the prophets.

For example, Jesus talked about his blood having to do with a new covenant. For us that might not mean much, but his Jewish friends would have thought immediately of the prophet Jeremiah.

Jeremiah 31:31-34

"The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD, 'because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

Hundreds of years before Christ, Jeremiah was talking about a covenant between God and people that would be different than before – based on a different kind of relationship with God. A covenant with forgiveness at its core, a covenant where people would have the Lord in their hearts. And that's exactly what Christ offers each of us. History prepared the way.

Not only did the past prepare the way for Christ, it's also **PARTICIPATED in God's salvation.**

The Israelites weren't just an illustration of what God could do. They weren't just a metaphor for what would happen with Christ hundreds of years later. They experienced for themselves God's rescuing hand. God has had his plan of salvation since before the beginning of time and people have been experiencing his grace ever since.

Isaiah 45:21-22

*Who foretold this long ago,
who declared it from the distant past?
Was it not I, the LORD?
And there is no God apart from me,
a righteous God and a Savior;
there is none but me.*

*"Turn to me and be saved,
all you ends of the earth;
for I am God, and there is no other.*

Whether we're talking about the Passover, or God sending manna from heaven or God saving Noah from the flood or God saving people from famine through Joseph or God parting of the Red Sea or God giving water from the rock or God helping David beat Goliath or God shutting the mouths of lions for Daniel or God helping Gideon win an impossible battle – His salvation was experienced personally over and over again by his people. And the Old Testament saints looked forward to the day when God's Messiah would come and bring the ultimate salvation for the world.

The past very much participated in God's salvation.

It also PROCLAIMS God's salvation.

Proclaiming is telling publicly what God has done. It's picking up a bullhorn and making sure everyone hears.

Let's look at Passover again. Here's what the Israelites were told about why they were to mark the Passover every year:

Exodus 12:26-27

Celebrate this day as a lasting ordinance for the generations to come...And when your children ask you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?' then tell them, 'It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.'" Then the people bowed down and worshiped.

Acting out the Passover meal every year was an excuse to remember. It was for the sake of posterity, so that future generations would not forget what God had done. Because to forget would be to risk walking away from God. Remembering drew the people into worship. They recognized they had a God who loved them fiercely and would do anything to protect them and help them. And as a people, they recognized the importance of talking about God's amazing works.

David would later write these words:

1 Chronicles 16:23

Sing to the LORD, all the earth; proclaim his salvation day after day.

The Lord's Supper has definite strong ties to the past, because the past was preparing for, participating in and proclaiming God's salvation. It's very similar to what we do in the present.

What happens when we celebrate the Lord's Supper today? Besides singing a couple songs, getting out of our chairs, going up and eating a little soggy piece of bread? What's going on here?

The same three ideas that tie the past to Christ's death also connect to the present.

First, we prepare.

The disciples asked Jesus, "Where should we prepare for the Passover?" And Jesus sent them to find a room and get it ready. That had to happen first. There had to be space cleared and set aside large enough for what Christ wanted to do. He had already identified the place he wanted to be in, and the disciples had to get it prepared.

Each time we come to communion, we have our own preparation to do. I like the way the Message version of the Bible translates Paul's words on the subject.

1 Corinthians 11:26-28

What you must solemnly realize is that every time you eat this bread and every time you drink this cup, you reenact in your words and actions the death of the Master. You will be drawn back to this meal again and again until the Master returns. You must never let familiarity breed contempt.

Anyone who eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Master irreverently is like part of the crowd that jeered and spit on him at his death. Is that the kind of "remembrance" you want to be part of? Examine your motives, test your heart, come to this meal in holy awe.

We always allow some time for people to think and pray before coming up and taking communion. It's good to stop and ask God, "Is there anything going on in me right now that needs forgiveness?" We also prepare by saying "Thank you, Jesus. Thank you for dying for me."

We can get in a rush on Sunday mornings and not make the proper preparations. Are we making the room in our hearts ready for what Christ wants to do?

In addition to preparing, we also participate in Christ's death. We apply it to ourselves.

You've heard the expression, "You are what you eat." Food that goes in us literally becomes part of us as the nutrients in it are absorbed into our blood stream. And as we internalize the message of communion, the message of Christ's death, it becomes part of us. And we are saying that we need it for ourselves and we accept it for ourselves.

The story of the disciples at that dinner is not very inspiring. Imagine it from Jesus' perspective. Here are these guys you've been with three years. You know going into the evening that Judas has already agreed to betray you. He's pretending nothing's wrong, but you know he's already sold you out. By the end of the night there's Peter, bragging about how faithful he is to you and you have to tell him, "Actually, you're going to turn your back on me in a very public way." And then you've got another little group of them arguing about who's the greatest. No one seems to be listening to what you've been saying all night. Here you've been wanting to share this last close time together, and it all sort of unravels.

That's how it looked for Jesus. And yet there he is, aware of all this that's going on, and he stills says, "This is my body and my blood. I'm doing this for you. You don't even understand it, but I'm doing it anyway." And he reaches out with the bread in his hand, and he gives it to Judas.

As we come to the table, we're right in there with that mix of disciples. Thinking we've got it together like Peter. Knowing we're secretly betraying him like Judas. Fighting with each other like James and John. And Jesus still reaches out his hand and offers us the bread and the cup. And he says, "This is for you. Will you take it?"

We don't have to be perfect to share in communion. We just need to acknowledge that we need what it represents.

As we participate in it, we are also **proclaiming Christ's death**.

Paul said it exactly that way in his first letter to the Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 11: 26

For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

It's like we're putting on a scene from a play, where we are over and over again repeating the message for each other and the world that Jesus died for me and for you. As we collectively say it by taking communion together, we show how the body of Christ looks today. People of all ages and from all walks of life join the parade and show how far reaching the love of Christ is. You may not have ever thought about it this way, but as you walk up and have that moment of time with the bread and the cup, you're making a statement.

Because of that, it's a good idea to make sure it's the statement you're really wanting to make. Do you believe Jesus died for you? If not, it doesn't really make sense for you to take communion. By taking part, you're saying that you're making the faith your own. We sang Say It Loud this morning, and that's what we do when we participate in communion.

There's a certain seriousness to the Lord's supper. We're remembering heavy things – our own sin, the sacrifice it took to deal with it. But it ends with a great hope. Because we're not just thinking about the past or our own present condition. We've got the future ahead of us as well, and it's a hopeful one.

When it comes to thinking about the future, the Lord's Supper reminds us that

Christ is preparing for his return.

You could almost miss the reference to the future in the story we read, but it's there:

And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God."

Christ's suffering wasn't the end. A time is coming when he'll return. Paul said that communion is only something we are doing for now. We proclaim the Lord's death "until he comes."

Christ established the celebration of the Lord's Supper to be enacted until God's kingdom comes in all its power and glory. And he's preparing for that day, even now.

John 14:2-3

In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

Each time we take communion, we do it with hope that this isn't all there is. Christ is coming back some day. and he's inviting us to **participate in his return.**

As we eat the bread and drink the juice, we say we are identifying with what Christ did for us in his death. But sharing in his past also means sharing in his future.

Romans 6:5 & 9

If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection...Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.

The Lord's supper points us forward, and Christ invites us to participate in something not only for here and now, but also for all eternity.

And that's what we proclaim about the future in the Lord's supper: There's more to come. Christ said he would drink the cup again. The next time, though, he won't be returning as the suffering Messiah. He'll be coming back in his kingdom as the King of kings.

Communion declares to the world that Jesus is coming back in power someday.

Past , present and future all come together in the event we're about to celebrate today. As we prepare for it in the next few minutes, I want to invite you to think about it in terms of your own personal history.

Looking behind you...are you living with regrets? Christ offers us a new past – his in exchange for ours. The old is gone, the new has come. He lets us borrow his history that's perfect.

Are you struggling with sins in your present life? Are you wrestling with whether or not you're even willing to participate in communion? Jesus is saying, "This is for you." And he is holding out the symbols of his forgiveness even this morning. All you have to do is say "I need it."

And when you look at your future, are you hopeful? God has good plans for you. The Lord's supper stands as a promise that the best is yet to come. He'll be back. We can live with hope, because there's more ahead.

So take a few moments to prepare room in your own life for Christ to do his work. Then when you're ready, participate in this act of remembering. And together we'll proclaim the name of Jesus, saying it loud enough for the world to hear.