

Maundy Thursday      2017  
The Salutory Gift

When God made covenants with His people, it often involved the shedding of sacrificial blood. For example, when God made His covenant with Abram in Genesis 15, Abram literally cut the animals in two and laid them in such a way that the Lord could pass through the middle of them.

It was no different when God made His covenant with the people of Israel through Moses. This covenant was also sealed by the death of a sacrificial victim. Its lifeblood was poured out both upon the altar and upon the people while Moses spoke the words of institution: “Behold the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words” (Exodus 24:8).

What was the point of all this blood and death? For one thing, it was to show the seriousness of sin. Sin has consequences. Remember God’s warning to Adam? “In the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:17). And St. Paul says that “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). The sacrificial rites reminded God’s people that sin was a serious matter, that they should not “think of sin but lightly” (*LSB* 451:3).

The rites also showed the extent of God’s wrath toward sin. God doesn’t just wink at our sins. He is holy and hates sin. He is angered by the disobedience of His people. And because He is also a just God, He cannot let sin go unpunished. There must be death. There must be blood. God’s wrath needed to be satisfied. But because God does not desire the death of the sinner, He provides a substitute for the guilty.

Thus, these sacrifices—as horrifying as they were—were also reminders of the depths of God’s love. God does not delight in death. He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. He would prefer that people

would turn from their evil ways and fear, love, and trust in Him alone. These bloody sacrifices were simply a means to an end. As the Scripture says, “You will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; You will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise” (Psalm 51:16–17).

God’s fervent desire has always been to have fellowship and reconciliation with His people. That is why He goes to such great lengths to establish His covenant with the people. And this becomes even more apparent by the fact that in many cases where sacrifices were offered, a meal followed.

For example, after Moses confirmed the covenant by throwing the blood from the basins on the people, he and Aaron, Aaron’s sons, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and they “beheld God, and ate and drank” (Exodus 24:11). They enjoyed table fellowship with the Lord, the God of Israel. And this was no small thing, especially considering the fact that no man can see the face of God and live (Exodus 33:20). And yet, here were Moses, his brother, his brother’s sons, and seventy of Israel’s chief people dining in the presence of God.

Clearly, this was a significant event in the life of Israel. A foundational event, in fact. And one that would be remembered throughout all the generations of Israelites. God had fulfilled His promise to Abraham. He had led His children out of Egypt and had established His covenant with them, as He had once done with Abraham.

And yet, we are reminded tonight that this first covenant was only temporary. It was incomplete. The blood of bulls and goats was not enough. Something more was needed. Something more was coming.

Through the mouths of His prophets, the Lord taught His people to look for this “something more,” for a new covenant that He would make with them.

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. (Jeremiah 31:31–32)

This covenant would surpass even the glory of that first covenant, for it would be characterized by the forgiveness of sins. “For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more” (Jeremiah 31:34). A new and greater covenant also meant that a new and greater mediator and sacrifice would be needed. For “there is no forgiveness without the shedding of blood” (Hebrews 9:22).

Who else could make such a sacrifice but the holy and spotless Son of God? Who else could secure “an eternal redemption” (Hebrews 9:12) for sinners except the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ? So it was that Jesus, born of Mary’s flesh, became “the mediator of a new covenant” (Hebrews 9:15), shedding His precious blood on Calvary once for all for sinners.

As Moses once sprinkled blood on the altar to make atonement for the people, so Christ, our greater Moses, made atonement for the sins of all people as His blood was splashed upon the altar of the cross. And by His innocent blood, the righteous anger of the Father has been satisfied forever. For every sin that Adam and his fallen sons and daughters commit, for every infraction of the Law of God, for every sinful desire, there now stands a perpetual sacrifice in the cross.

But remember -- Moses not only threw the blood on the altar, he also threw it on the people. Jesus Christ has done the same for you. His blood

has been sprinkled on you in your Baptism. Your souls have been cleansed by the purifying blood of Christ. You were “buried therefore with Him by baptism into death” (Romans 6:4). “You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:11).

So you are covered. Your sins no longer stand against you to accuse you or condemn you, for you are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1). And as a confirmation and pledge of the covenant that He has made with you, your greater Moses has also instituted a covenant meal.

On the eve of His crucifixion, Christ met with His disciples to celebrate the Passover. And like Moses before Him, He instituted this new covenant saying: “ ‘Take, eat, this is My body.’ And He took a cup, and when He had given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’ ” (Matthew 26:28).

Jesus uses the same word here that Moses did when he instituted the old covenant. Except that Jesus doesn’t say, “Behold, the blood of the covenant . . . ” (Exodus 24:8). Instead, he says, “This is **My** blood of the covenant.” His blood, not the blood of some ox or goat, is what is being poured out on the altar of the cross for guilty sinners. His blood will be poured into chalices for Christians to drink until the end of time.

Tonight, we come not to celebrate an old covenant, but the new covenant in Jesus’ blood. We rejoice that God has made His covenant with us through the death of his holy Lamb, Jesus Christ, and that He has established the salutary gift of the Lord’s Supper for us Christians to eat and to drink.

Like Moses and Aaron and his sons, and the seventy elders of Israel, we, too, “behold God and eat and drink” (Exodus 24:11). Here we have Table fellowship with our God. This is truly God’s mountain -- not Mount Sinai, but Mount Zion, where we behold God and live. In this meal of the new covenant, we receive the gifts of Christ’s true body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins. And as we receive these holy gifts, we do so remembering with thanksgiving His sacrificial death for our sins and for the sins of all people. Amen.