

February 3, 2002

I Kings 8:22-30, 54-66
I Corinthians 6:13-15, 19-20

A MORSEL & A SIP

I don't know how you do it – manage to sit there dry-eyed, in the face of a moment like the one we just read about. I had to practice and practice so I wouldn't break down and be unable to finish the passage. So many hopes and dreams coming together – so much earnest gratitude and consecration. The whole Jewish nation is entering a new era, and hopes are so high and faith is so strong. Yet we know what will happen in a few short years: the nation will go bankrupt; there will be civil war; the nation will split; only a handful of kings of either North or South will even *pretend* to care about God or about keeping the Covenant. And of course, faithful people and prophets will suspect that this is *why* Israel is defeated, destroyed, and scattered by nation after nation ever afterward, until her final decimation under Rome.

We have grown calloused and hardened to such plights. Horror stories from every part of the globe have poured in upon us for generations. It is not just past history but also present reality that individuals and peoples are slaughtered, their hopes are dashed, their faith is mocked – and no God comes to their rescue. If you work with pick or axe all day, your hands become calloused. If one part of your body is cut or smashed in the same place enough times, the scar tissue gets thick, and sometimes that part of your body becomes nearly useless. Well, our hearts get scarred and calloused too. But if you live in this “broken realm” *without* a broken heart, why would I even want to have a conversation with you? In fact, if you do not have calluses on your heart, I don't think you can survive for very long in this broken world. People who pretend they do not have any deep and serious wounds are doing just that – pretending. And the real question is: When and in what circumstances will we ever let *anything* get past our shields and truly reach our hearts again? When and in what circumstances will we claim any real hope or allow ourselves to live by faith again?

Some of us (and I am one of them) can tell you that the only reason we ever let anything get past our shields and calluses – the only reason we dare to hold *any* hope or try to live by faith again – is because of a Jewish carpenter. Years ago, He lived and died and rose again to open up for us a WAY to live in this world with HOPE and FAITH again. And indeed, it is a strange and eerie WAY – different from anything ever heard of or thought about before.

Judaism – no matter how much we honor it, no matter how much we owe to it, no matter how much it is the mother and source of Christendom – is about peace and prosperity *here on earth*. That is the hope it holds out and the reason for its Covenant. That is its mission: to be a light to the nations, so that everyone will “see the light,” turn to God, and obey the Covenant – and then there will be peace and prosperity on the earth for everyone. And the reason Judaism can never accept Jesus as the Messiah is precisely because this was not His purpose or message. Jesus did not preach or expect peace on earth. He came with a different Message about a different Kingdom – unseen, and eternal.

That is hard to swallow. Hard enough to split the Jewish nation, and to cause mayhem on the earth ever since. It is hard to shift from all our earthly expectations to something spiritual, something interior; at first it even seems unreal – ethereal. Yet it is harder still to go on believing in the hopes and promises of the First Covenant – because we know the results. However illogical and stupid and unbelievable it may seem in theory, the whole world keeps choosing chaos and pain instead of banding together to make life better for everybody. The obvious and irrefutable truth is: Even Israel never kept the Covenant, never mind spreading it to the rest of the world. Clearly and obviously Judaism is correct, her Covenant is from God, and it *could* work – IF the people of the world would work it. But they will not. Or they are incapable of keeping it. Whichever. Life will never be lived on the basis of the First Covenant (the Old Testament) – not in this world. A significant number of people, even among those who swear allegiance to the Covenant, will not even keep the core precepts of the Ten Commandments. They prefer to cheat and pretend rather than to keep the Covenant with willing, obedient hearts. And never more than a handful of people, even within Israel, ever work it for very long or with any earnestness. Nothing works if we will not work it. Which means there is no hope; there is no reason for faith. At least not *from* this earth or *on* this earth.

But Jesus came and blew our minds: Stop being nearsighted. Life on this earth is about more than life *on this earth*. The Way you live here will count and will accomplish things beyond this world – because none of you are staying here. If you love somebody and they die, you may *think* it went for nothing and is all over, but that is not the truth. If you find yourself endowed with incredible gifts of artistry and design and you build a great building and then somebody runs an airplane into it and destroys it, you may think all of your gifts and

labors went for nothing, but that is not the truth. “My Kingdom is not of this world. But you can live for me – live for my eternal Kingdom – right here and now. And I promise you it *will* count! It will last and be real in a realm far more brilliant and lasting than anything you can imagine here.”

“Well, that’s just pie in the sky,” a lot of people say. But they do not put up their blood for collateral; they do not rise from the dead to prove it; they do not meet us in our prayers any time we are willing to slow down and listen. So after we have had some experience with the reality and love of the Risen Christ in our own lives, we no longer care very much what they say.

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The eagerness of young Solomon and his enthusiasm for God and the Covenant are poignant in today’s Scripture passage. Solomon’s hopes and dreams are landlocked and earthbound, but he is young and they are very real. The whole nation feels like the time has finally arrived. They have been through slavery and mayhem, and many times Israel has come close to losing it all. But now, thanks to David, they rule from Egypt to the Euphrates. David fought off all their enemies, and they are prosperous and strong. Surely God is with them, and they will go from strength to strength, and all the promises of God will be fulfilled – in the real and physical world. Every person who has experienced a little success on earth knows how this feels. But like Solomon, they seldom know how brief that time will be.

In a few years, Solomon himself will break the Covenant. And it will not be a minor infraction. He will blast the Jewish Way to smithereens forever. He will take his reputation for human wisdom seriously and, in human pride, decide that he is smarter than God – more intelligent than the Covenant. Most of the kings who come after him will follow his example – until there is nothing left. Solomon was so influential that a lot of *you* still think he was right. But we will talk about that next week.

For the moment, if you are willing, think about the difference between that vast throng that gathered in Jerusalem to dedicate the temple, and the tiny gathering of people here this morning. A whole nation suspended life for a whole week – dancing, singing, feasting, praying – expecting earthly prosperity and success, and for the long run. The 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep were cooked in the flames

on the altar, not to mention all the lesser sacrifices. It was a great party in honor of God – food and drink until nobody could hold any more.

I must digress, because the temple meals are the forerunner of our communion meals, and the contrast tells many things about the difference between the two Covenants. Every ancient religion had its temples, but we will stay with Israel. Many people equate “temple” with “cathedral,” and that throws off our understanding. For Israel, the temple building housed important equipment and the Ark of the Covenant, but nobody met inside the temple building to worship. The priests went there to keep lamps burning, prepare incense, and get supplies, but the people gathered in the courts *outside* the temple. The altar (and the great basin of water) was outside the front doors in the open air. The priests were butchers and cooks, and the altar was the great community kitchen of the nation.

If you want to “get into it” a little, think about wood and water. On high holy days, like Passover, the crowds were huge and the altar was cooking many sacrifices at the same time. But even on normal days, the altar was cooking sacrifices all the time. Palestine was like Southern California in the old days: wood and water were fairly scarce. The Levites – one-twelfth of the population of Israel – were set aside for temple service. What do you think they were doing, sitting around playing chess? Hundreds of Levites spent their entire lives, from dawn to dark (except on the Sabbath), finding and carrying wood from all over the land to the altar. You could not have sacrifices if you did not have wood. And many hundreds of Levites spent their entire lives carrying water to the temple – all day, every day of their lives (except on the Sabbath).

Our concepts change over time – sometimes slowly, but nevertheless. All temple sacrifices evolved from ancient beliefs that fire is sacred, and that you could feed the gods by burning sacrifices on the altar. If you left the meat on the altar long enough, it was entirely consumed – God ate it all. In Solomon’s time, that was still the practice for a sin offering: God got it all; hopefully if the meat was good enough and God liked it enough, you would be forgiven. But most sacrifices were shared meals: God got part of it, and those who brought the sacrifice ate part of it; because it was cooked on God’s altar and shared with God, the food was sanctified, and those who ate it were sanctified and blessed and forgiven.

The subject is bigger than one sermon or one day, but themes and beliefs of today are always connected to themes and beliefs from ancient times. Sometimes in the transition, our imagery traps us in constructs that at first we do not notice or intend. And they can take us to terrible places. In time, for instance, Jesus was called “*The Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world.*” A lamb without blemish was the familiar sacrifice to be burned on the altar of God – a gift that would appease God’s wrath, bring us forgiveness, and restore us to God’s favor.

But then Jesus needed to be the perfect sacrifice – far beyond a mere animal without blemish. His death was to appease God for all time and for all of our sins. Only, we could not provide this sacrifice. It was far beyond our worth or our power. So where did it come from? Suddenly the flaw in the imagery gets sprung: God provided the sacrifice. And classic Christian theology (not from the beginning, mind you, but within a few hundred years), following the logic of its own imagery, concluded that the loving God sacrificed his own Son to satisfy his own sense of justice, and that is how we are “saved.” That is, the death of Jesus is how we are saved from the wrath and the everlasting punishment of God.

Yet Jesus – God’s anointed one – came to reveal that God was not the ogre we had feared and assumed God to be. Jesus came to reconcile us to a God of LOVE who had and would always love us as God’s own children. And He tries and tries to make that clear, but it is hard to break us out of old images that we have held for thousands of years. And the false imagery takes us right back to where we started, only far worse: Presumably God, having no authority strong enough to forgive us from a place of love, mercy, and grace, has to kill his own Son to satisfy some principle of “justice” and “righteousness” that *humans* have made up. And so Jesus’ coming – and Jesus’ Message and purpose – is undone at the very center of what Jesus did to prove the exact opposite. That is, the Cross and the Resurrection are what reveal to us the true purpose and love of God – and the extent to which God and God’s Messiah will go to reveal and prove to us the mercy and forgiveness of God. But it has been turned around until God is worse and more despicable than any human father we have ever imagined. And the truth is: God did not kill Jesus. We did. The crucifixion was our idea – our contribution.

I know it is disturbing to many who have been taught wrong concepts all their lives. But if we want to stay with the joy and love of Jesus despite all the mayhem of the world all around us, then we have to stay with Jesus – and with our own experience of His Holy Spirit – and not be drawn off by Athanasius or the writer of Hebrews or me or *anyone* who tries to dilute and reverse the incredible Message and invitation of the Messiah of God. *You are loved!* And the God of love is not evil or angry or bloodthirsty behind the scenes or at the core. Expect mercy – not wrath. It is not our own goodness or our own love that we trust. *It is the goodness and love of God that we trust.* And God is always trying to reach us, awaken us, transform us, encourage us, and free us from whatever guilt, shame, and fear we are still carrying with us.

It is still incredible that when the rulers and authorities of Israel said to Jesus, “You have no right and no authority to teach and proclaim what you are saying; give it up and go home, or we will deal with you” – Jesus would not give it up or minimize the Message God had entrusted to Him. He would not run away – not even from the Cross.

Anyway, there were 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep all being cooked on the altar and shared in a great communal meal of wild celebration and joy. And all we get is this tiny sip of juice and a morsel of bread too small to last until noon. We spoil nobody’s appetite here. What in the world is going on? Well, it really is not just “in the world,” or we completely miss it. That’s part of the point. We do not pray for worldly success; we pray that we will be faithful – that we will be obedient. We pray that we will hear the Spirit’s guidance and that we will be willing to follow it. And we say “Thank You” to the One who invited us into a very new and different WAY – full of hope and faith, when we thought that hope and faith were gone forever. And we remember His love, and we give Him our love in return.

How did Jesus make this jump – how did He put it together? How could He know the presence of God and “see” the unseen Kingdom so clearly? How could He proclaim a Gospel that went so far beyond the Law and beyond keeping the rules, until even creatures of dust and flaws and failures like us could hear and feel the possibility of a personal bond and relationship with the Numinous, Eternal God? Even if He Himself saw it, how could He have nerve enough – confidence enough – to invite us into a WAY so different? And how could He be so certain? So certain that nobody and nothing could dissuade Him from His Message and His mission?

Such questions are beyond human answers. All our creeds are minuscule and foolish in the face of such questions. It is the mystery of the Messiah and Son of God. He is human, yet unbelievably different. He does not cheat, coerce, or dominate, yet we cannot shake His influence. He hurts nobody, yet He is hated with ferocity greater than this world displays against its most hated criminals. His WAY is so different, it threatens, angers, and draws venom from even the most religious people. And He is kind and compassionate, yet He will not compromise His truth, will not back away from confrontation, will not make peace with those who oppose Him – no matter how wealthy they are; no matter what high reputations they have in this world; no matter how much they malign Him, discredit Him, or insist that He has no right to put them in a bad light by bringing a LIGHT so much better, so much softer, so much truer.

How did Jesus make this jump? I believe it is impossible to explain except by the realization that He is the Christ – the Messiah sent by God. In a sense, that is no explanation. It is a leap of faith. I hope we have all taken that leap. If we do not trust Him enough to make the jump with Him, then what we do here today has no meaning for us. Instead of filling us with comfort, love, inspiration, and resolve, it is merely a morsel of bread and a sip of juice. Contrast Solomon's great feast, and the thousands of sheep and oxen being sacrificed, with the quiet inner communion we take this day, remembering a very different sacrifice. This meal can be missed and abused just as badly as Solomon's great feast. How *Jesus* lived is no protection against how *we* live – unless we follow Him into a very different LIFE. Nevertheless, contrast the great festival of dedicating the outer, physical temple with the interior dedication of a very small, inner temple: ourselves. It is a profound contrast between two very different "ways": The Outside versus The Inside Journey.

Are we still looking for an outer vision and purpose? Are we here to accomplish something grand or impressive in the outer world? It is always a strange relief to turn to the outer world and escape from our inner destiny and purpose – our relationship of obedience to the Holy Spirit of our Risen Lord. But the outer world is never the pearl of great price. Jesus learned deeply from the history and travail of His people, but He knew His life and Message would cause mayhem, as any new "way" always does in our world. The tendencies to go back to our old ways of thinking and doing are constant. So we keep reminding ourselves and each other: The reconciliation – the peace – with God is not about the outer world. All the promises, satisfactions, rewards,

and delights of Jesus' New WAY are about an unseen, eternal Kingdom – not about the physical realm in which we find ourselves for the moment. For that very reason, we can never determine how true or real His WAY is except by walking in it – walking the WAY: following Him into it. We think we can imagine what it might be like to open our lives to Him – to grant Him our allegiance and obedience. But that is never more than imagination – a fantasy – until we actually do it: “My life is yours, Lord. Do with it what you will.”

Communion, as the very word implies, is something we all wish to take in unity and community, in peace and love. We want to do it in a Christian Way – we want to do it like Jesus did it. That may seem more difficult than usual, for some of us. So we need to remember *how* Jesus did it. His whole world was swarming around Him like angry hornets when Jesus took the first communion meal with His disciples. Temple police were looking for Him and would, before the evening was over, arrest Him. He would be dead by three o'clock the following afternoon. The reality forever haunts us: “*In the same night in which he was denied, forsaken, betrayed, our Lord took bread*” Only, that was not pointing to His enemies; that was said about His very best friends. How do we ever recover from that?

By the way, the peace and unity, the love and mercy, the community of grace and forgiveness that are so powerfully embodied in the sacrament of communion are about the bond and relationship between us and God – between us and Jesus. That is all supposed to flow into our relationships and into our bonds with each other too, of course, but that is not where it begins or ends. And that is why nothing in this world can destroy this meal or keep it from us – if we accept our Lord's invitation and come to His banquet. So we still remember Him, still love Him, still trust and desire above all other things to follow Him.