
Title: The Meaning of Advent

Text: Matthew 26:6-30

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Introduction

"(The sitting room) had undergone a surprising transformation. The walls and ceiling were so hung with living green, that it looked a perfect grove; from every part of which, bright gleaming berries glistened. The crisp leaves of holly, mistletoe, and ivy reflected back the light, as if so many little mirrors had been scattered there; and such a mighty blaze went roaring up the chimney, as that dull petrification of a hearth had never known in (his) time, or (his partner's), or for many and many a winter season gone. Heaped up on the floor, to form a kind of throne, were turkeys, geese, game, poultry, brawn, great joints of meat, sucking-pigs, long wreaths of sausages, mince-pies, plum-puddings, barrels of oysters, red-hot chesnuts, cherry-cheeked apples, juicy oranges, luscious pears, immense twelfth-cakes, and seething bowls of punch, that made the chamber dim with their delicious steam."

If we were to continue reading this passage from this novella, we would find that sitting on that festal throne of all things pleasant and glorious to the palate is the jolly giant we have come to know as The Ghost of Christmas Present. That sitting room belongs to Ebenezer Scrooge. Only a couple of hours earlier, that sitting room had been cold and dark, providing the perfect climate for Scrooge to gobble on his gruel. But now, the arrival of the Ghost of Christmas Present has transformed the room into a luscious feast fit for a king. It is not an accident that Charles Dickens portrays Christmas in the present as a grand feast. We are not here to unpack Dickens. But it is worth noting that feasting and food are integral to all of the major scenes in his pot-boiler, the Christmas Carol. All that is good about Christmas, and to be shared with those in need no less, is manifested by an orientation around food and feasting. The Christmas Table is where relationships with family and friends are strengthened, deepened, and enriched. This is foreign to Scrooge, a man marked by broken relationships.

If Scrooge is to experience reconciliation and restoration in his relationships, he must indulge himself in the banquet of Christmas Present. In the grandest of these table scenes of the Christmas Carol, the Ghost of Christmas Present beckons Scrooge to "know me better, man" through a feast designed for Scrooge's conversion and the reparation of relationship. In a transformed room, filled wall to wall and floor to ceiling with the choicest of all Christmas banquets everywhere, we are given a glimpse of the kinds of Christmases that await a transformed Scrooge.

Dickens is fiction. What we have in the meal before us tonight is not. It is here in this Table that we find the true meaning of the Advent Season. The connection that Dickens makes between meals and ultimate meaning is amplified exponentially in the sacred pages of Scriptures. Meals are inseparable from the storyline of the Bible. From the garden in Genesis to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb and the abundance of nourishment in the New Garden of Revelation meals

tell us something about the Person and Work of Jesus, the focal point of the Christian story. But there is one meal recorded for us that not only proclaims the Person and work of Christ, it also proclaims to us our new identity as members of a New Covenant. In this Table we find our story, a story forever tied to the story of Jesus in the grand drama of redemption.

And it may not seem readily apparent, but this Table before us tonight is a Christmas table, proclaiming to us the nature and mission of the One who was announced by angels, ushered to earth with a star, and worshipped by wise men. We cannot know Christmas present without grasping the proclamation of this Table for it is in this Table that Christmas present gets its wonder and joy.

Our passage this evening is Matthew 26. We are going to look at this passage for a few moments, as we break bread together on this first Sunday of Advent. Speaking of which... keep these things in mind... Advent ends on December 25, which is a Sunday this year. We will again be partaking of the Lord's Table on that day as a nice bookend to the Advent season.

Preparation for burial

This passage actually begins back at verse 6, but we are going to begin with verse 17. In verse 6, this passage begins at a meal, a meal in which a woman anoints Christ's head with an expensive perfume in preparation for Christ's burial. This woman's act of faith, Christ says, will be proclaimed wherever the gospel is proclaimed. This woman's act of faith bears witness to the gospel, because in her act she anticipates a kingdom that will be won in the death of a king. Her pouring out of the expensive ointment on Christ's head is an anointment befitting the heir to the Davidic throne.

Such an act of faith is met with contempt by those who have no interest in bowing their knee to a Davidic heir who brings healing and salvation to the "have nots" and throws verbal stones at the oppressive "haves". Rather than carouse with the so-called righteous, this heir to David's throne not only eats meals with sinners, but allows himself to be anointed by the disenfranchised.

So, the enemies of Jesus, those self-appointed guardians of the Mosaic covenant, set about to kill Jesus and they have help from the inside. Judas agrees to betray or deliver up or handover Jesus. That word "deliver" you see in verse 14 has the same root word as the word "betray" in verse 15. In fact, that word which literally means "handover" occurs 10 times in chapter 26 alone. If we were going to take out our crayons and color chapter 26, the primary color would be "handover" or "betrayal".

And Judas agrees to handover Jesus for 30 pieces of silver, which is a bit ironic, given the disciples were complaining just a few short verses ago about how a large sum of money flowing out of an alabaster jar had been wasted on Jesus' preparation for burial.

Which brings us to verse 17. Matthew 26, beginning with verse 17. This is what God's Word proclaims to us.

17 Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Where will you have us prepare for you to eat the Passover?"
18 He said, "Go into the city to a certain man and say to him, 'The Teacher says, My time is at hand. I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples.'" 19 And the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover.

Just as the woman prepares Christ for burial, the disciples prepare the Passover for Christ. There's a lot of preparing going on. Given Matthew has already described Christ's anointing and a plot to kill Jesus through betrayal, the mere mention of Passover heightens the ominous tone of the passage. Judas sought an opportunity to "hand over" Jesus and that opportunity is Passover and the feast of Unleavened Bread. Passover and the feast of Unleavened Bread had been observed in Israel from antiquity. The Passover meal was for Israel catechism in a meal. The Passover meal was a preaching and teaching device. It preached to them God's salvation on Israel's behalf in leading them out of slavery in Egypt. It proclaimed to them God's provision of salvation through the waters of the Red Sea and from the pursuing Egyptians through the death of a lamb... in exchange for the life of the firstborn. For hundreds of years, the Passover meal not only proclaimed God's salvation of his people, but judgment of those who do not respond to the true God in faith. It is this kind of proclamation meal of salvation and judgment that the One anointed for burial plans to eat with his disciples.

And as One anticipating his own death in this Passover, Christ says "my time is at hand." It is here we again get the sense that Judas and the religious leaders are not orchestrating the events of this passage. Even as they plot and devise and plan, ultimately they can do nothing that Jesus does not allow them to do. It is not their time. It is Christ's time.

But Christ is not simply anticipating his upcoming death when he says "my time is at hand." "My time is at hand" is the central thought of this entire passage and it anticipates what is to follow. One of the main connecting themes throughout the book of Matthew, if not the primary connecting theme, is Christ's fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures. Time and again throughout the book, Matthew shows the progression of Christ becoming all that the Old Testament promised in the Messianic heir to the Davidic throne and kingdom. In Christ's work and in his teaching, Christ is bringing all of the Old Testament promises to completion in himself, the heir to David's throne who is establishing a kingdom.

Christ, throughout Matthew, has been filling up to their fullest measure the meaning and purposes and intentions of the Old Testament types, shadows, promises, and prophecies. Christ is the Promised Messiah of the Old Testament and heir to David's throne. In saying "my time is at hand", Christ captures the essence of his fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures. "My time is at hand" has in its purview not simply, "hey, my number is up and it's time to die". No. "My time is at hand" places the events of Matthew 26 squarely in the center point of all of history, period. Christ declares, in the transmission of a message to the owner of the Upper Room, all of history has been leading up to this defining moment.

By way of Christ's statement, we must understand Christ's death and resurrection and all of the circumstances surrounding that event as defining the meaning and purposes for all of history. And this includes the immediate context. Judas's plans to betray Jesus are part of the grand design for Christ's "time" which is at hand. Judas's intentions themselves are part and parcel to the filling up the meaning of history to its fullest meaning.

The cosmic significance of Christ's statement, "my time is at hand" naturally flows into the second meal of this passage. Verse 20:

20 When it was evening, he reclined at table with the twelve. 21 And as they were eating, he said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." 22 And they were very sorrowful and began to say to him one after another, "Is it I, Lord?" 23 He answered, "He who has dipped his hand in the dish with me will betray me. 24 The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born." 25 Judas, who would betray him, answered, "Is it I, Rabbi?" He said to him, "You have said so."

We are not going to dwell on these verses at this point, but there are a few points to consider. First, notice this is the second meal of the larger passage. The first reclining at table where the woman anointed Jesus anticipates the later reclining at table with the disciples. More on that in a moment.

The second thing we need to see here is the two parallel questions. Notice that the same question is on the lips of all of the disciples and more specifically Judas. "Is it I, Lord?" The disciples are already in a bad light in this passage, having been angry at the outrageous display of wasted money at the expense of the poor. Here, they are asking the same question as the one who is plotting to kill Jesus. The parallel questions place the disciples within the context of betrayal. They may not have a direct hand in betraying Jesus, but we find them later in the passage fleeing the scene of Christ's arrest. In this way, Matthew shows how the rejection and denial of Christ was complete. It is universal. Before it is over, there is no one, including God himself, who will come to Christ's defense. The entire story of the Bible has been moving to this point, and Christ will enter the climactic drama utterly alone.

The third thing to notice here is Christ's use of the Son of Man title for himself. This isn't simply a radical Jewish rabbi fomenting destabilization of Jewish culture and identity who is being handed over to the religious oppressors. This Anointed One who is heir to David's throne is none other than Daniel's Shekinah-gloried Son of Man who reigns over heaven and earth. It is this Son of Man who is being handed over. It is this Son of Man who reclines at table with the one who will hand him over AND the rest who will desert him. It is this Son of Man whose time is "at hand".

And that brings us to the focal point of this second meal in this passage:

26 Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." 27 And he

took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, 28 for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. 29 I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

Before we get to the point of what happens here, if we were hearing these verses as Matthew's original audience, the early church, we'd notice the sequence of what occurs. The sequential pattern in verse 26 is the same sequential pattern in Matthew 14 with the feeding of the five thousand. Listen to Matthew 14:

Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples.

Notice the sequence. Took the bread, said a blessing, broke the bread and gave it to the disciples. Matthew's readers would have picked up on this. Like the feeding of the 5000, the bread broken here speaks of a sustenance that is not of earthly origin. This is sustenance is from above. The parallel to Christ's previous miracle is meant to push both the disciples and the original hearers in the early church beyond the physical sustenance and see Christ as the true Sustenance from heaven, the True Unleavened bread proclaimed in the very feast they are observing.

And this feast is the second meal of this passage. At the earlier feast, a woman pours out expensive ointment anticipating Christ's death and anointing his head as the heir to the Davidic throne. These two meals are inseparable. Preparation for burial in the anointing of a king is preparation for the bread and the wine. The One holding the broken bread and the cup is the Anointed One who has been prepared for burial. The Burial meal gives rise to the Inaugural meal.

The pouring out of the blood of the covenant is parallel to the pouring of the alabaster in anticipation of Christ's death. "The gospel proclaimed in the whole world" is parallel to "I drink in my Father's kingdom". The kingdom takes on eschatological "globalness" implications as the Table proclaims Christ's death and the forgiveness of sins in the whole world... wherever there are potential Christ worshipers. The ointment is poured "on my body", which is parallel to the broken bread, which "is my body". And "preparing for burial" is parallel to "preparing for the Passover." To be prepared for burial is to be prepared for the Passover, for the Passover anticipates the burial. The "burial" of 6-13 presupposes the "death" of 26-30.

In the various connections between these two occasions for "reclining at table", *meal* dominates this passage, a passage in which Christ declares "my time is at hand". In this way, this meal is itself a landing point for the trajectory of all of the Old Testament promises as they are fulfilled in Christ. This meal, and all that it represents, is anticipated throughout the Old Testament, most notably in the manna from heaven and the Passover meal of the Exodus.

But this Bread from Heaven who offers himself to his disciples here is not simply the Unleavened Bread of the Passover. This Anointed One has been prepared for

burial. What is unmistakable in what Christ says here is the Unleavened Bread from Heaven is also the Lamb of the Passover.

This Passover meal includes an interpretation not simply of the meal itself, but all of the cross and resurrection events which are to follow. This meal isn't simply about remembering the Exodus. Christ's time is at hand. The significance is of historic proportions. This meal has been set in the unfolding drama of the entire Bible. Christ does not leave his disciples to interpret these unfolding events on their own. Christ's time is at hand. And within this Last Passover meal, Christ sets before them the meaning, not only of his impending death and resurrection, but meaning for all of history.

Christ (and Matthew who writes this) wants those disciples to understand that even as they are reclining at Table, Christ is filling up the meaning of their Old Testament Scriptures to their fullest measure in front of their eyes. All that was ever meant in the Feast of the Unleavened Bread and the Passover meal lands here. Its time is at hand. We see this in the two-fold statement of the Supper. Jesus broke the bread and said, "Take eat; this is my body". Lambs were broken, the life of the lamb exchanged for the life of the firstborn Son of the household. Christ's body is being broken for his disciples, those who have received him in faith. This Messiah who is Heir to David's Throne is bringing about the culmination of Israel's history in brokenness. This is the Davidic Messiah-King who brings in a different kind of a kingdom, a kingdom marked by brokenness and sacrifice and disadvantage.

Before the events of Christ's death are over in the following chapters, Christ will be so broken, his life will be exchanged for the lives of those to whom he gives the bread. These disciples who will desert him in his neediest hour are receiving a proclamation of atonement. Their aim is to save their lives. When the circumstances are most dire, they will opt for self-preservation. Yet the one who is feeding them this Passover meal will be for them a Lamb broken. His life exchanged for theirs. Christ's broken body is for them eternal life. There will be a death of the Lamb in the broken body so that the disciples might live.

And Jesus said, "Drink of it, all of you, this is my blood." Lambs were poured out, the blood of the lamb applied to the doorpost as satisfaction of God's wrath. Atonement, as it was portrayed in the Passover, was not simply a life exchanged for a life, but also satisfied God's justice. From the very beginning, blood sacrifice was required for the forgiveness of sins, and sins can only be forgiven when God's justice has been satisfied.

It is here Christ's places this event in the great drama of redemption. "This is my blood poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." The blood poured out is a life poured out in the place of another who has sinned and has been found guilty. The sacrifice dies or the sinner dies. Blood poured out is atonement for sin. This is Christ's interpretation of this Last Supper. This is Christ's interpretation of world history. This is Christ's interpretation of the history of His redeemed people. This is Christ's interpretation of his impending death. This is Christ's interpretation of His "time at hand". Because of man's rebellion sin must be atoned for. The very One who has been violated in man's rebellion against God has inserted himself into the

time and space of history. His time is at hand. All of history, especially as it unfolding in the Old Testament through Israel's history, has been pointing to this. The sacrifice dies in the stead of the one who should die because of rebellion against the Creator. The Great Wrong of Adam's rebellion is going to be forgiven in the broken and bloodied Son of Man who has set aside his glory and has become the Lamb of the Passover.

Not only is Christ here the Bread of the Unleavened Bread feast and the Lamb of the Passover meal, he is the New Covenant. What is "poured out" is the blood of the Covenant. The Passover Lamb had covenant significance. The blood sacrifices of the tabernacle and temple were in essence re-creation of the Passover lamb sacrifice. This blood sacrifice was at the heart of Israel's Covenant made with God at Sinai. The covenant with God at Sinai was inaugurated and ratified in blood poured out, the death of an animal portraying what would happen to covenant breakers. This is what Exodus 24:4-11 says:

"Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. He rose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel. 5 And he sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the LORD. 6 And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar. 7 Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient." 8 And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words." 9 Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, 10 and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. 11 And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank."

Having been sprinkled with the blood of the covenant, these elders enjoy a feasty meal in the throne room of heaven.

Here in Matthew, with Christ's time at hand, Christ declares himself to be the Covenant, his blood sprinkled on those who partake of this meal that comes to them from heaven. This blood of the Covenant is Christ himself poured out on behalf of His people. Here in Matthew 26, the grand and glorious New Covenant promised in Deuteronomy, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel is "at hand", in the brokenness and blood poured out by the Bread from Heaven and the Passover Lamb. Christ's time is at hand in filling up the meaning of the New Covenant to its fullest and highest measure. The New Covenant in the person of Jesus is at hand. In Christ's death, the New Covenant will be ratified by his body and blood, bringing into existence a new people with new hearts and a new identity.

Conclusion

What does this Table have to do with Christmas? From the very beginning of Matthew, the person and work of Jesus is identified with "saving people from their

sins”, as a fulfillment of the Old Testament promises. The angel says to Joseph, **your wife will give birth to a son, and you are to name Him Jesus, because He will save his people from their sins.** This son born to Joseph, according to the same first chapter of this book, is the heir to the Davidic throne. This heir will take his name from Joshua a savior of Israel. But this New Joshua will lead His people into a different kind of a promised land... a Davidic kingdom inaugurated by atonement. It has been no small controversy in the book of Matthew that this Davidic heir is in the sin forgiving business (9:2). This son who will save his people from their sins now breaks the bread and lifts the cup declaring that the time is at hand to fill up the promise of salvation through forgiveness of sins to its highest measure. Take eat, drink of the cup. The proclamation of the angel is at hand in the pouring out of the blood of the covenant on behalf of Christ’s New Creation, His people.

“My time is at hand”. It is for this moment that a shekinah star rose in the east proclaiming the arrival of a King for whom there are no rivals. In the form of a baby, heaven intruded the earth’s darkness. In this baby born as the heir to David’s throne all of history finds its meaning. This table is a microcosm, a picture, a portrayal, a proclamation of the person and work of the son of the virgin. Matthew traces the steps of this Davidic heir from chapter 1, showing how all along the way, this New Joshua is fulfilling the Old Testament promises, and revealing to us the original intent and meaning of those promises. The one to whom the wise men gave gifts for burial (hear that earlier story whisper of the woman with the alabaster jar) grows up to become the Passover Lamb, the Bread come from heaven providing eternal life and sustenance to His people. This is the purpose of Joseph’s dream. This is the meaning of the star of Bethlehem. From the very beginning this king had been prepared for death and burial. In this table we find the destiny of the baby born Emmanuel, God with us, come to save his people from their sins. In every way, this Last Supper of Matthew 26 is a Christmas meal. Jesus came into the world to provide forgiveness of sins for Jew and Gentile alike. That time has arrived. Christ’s time, promised in the garden in Genesis 3:15, is at hand. The birth of Emmanuel finds its meaning and destiny and proclamation of the bread and the cup. God with us, the New Joshua, will provide salvation for His people in his broken body and his blood poured out.

Meaning?

What does this mean for us? What is our response to this kind of proclamation found in the Table, especially at Christmas time?

That transformed sitting room of Ebenezer Scrooge represented the best of Christmas for Dickens. For many of us (and I realize not all of us) that sitting room connects with us because that is what we envision in all good Christmas times. Lots of food. A lot of feast. Time spent with family and friends building and enriching relationships around large tables full of food. The food, as much as it physically satisfies (save the fruitcake which might kill you), is supposed to speak to the satisfaction we find in being with family and friends.

But you and I both know that Normal Rockwell is not reality. There's always something broken at Christmas. A heart. A relationship. A toy. A family. Health. A bank account. A memory. We live in the midst of brokenness and sin. What is broken at Christmas is us. It may not always be immediately obvious. But somewhere lurking below the grand feast is brokenness of sin in need of reconciliation and restoration. It is brokenness of our own making. We point fingers at Scrooge, yet we empathize with his eventual conversion because we know deep down Scrooge is us. We all need saved.

It is not in the Christmas feast we will find our redemption or our restoration. It is in the Christ of this Table. We cannot save ourselves. We cannot provide meaning to life for ourselves. In fact, we are the deserters. Given the chance, we would abandon Jesus. And so we come to this Table bringing nothing. We must be given meaning outside of ourselves. Our identity must come from outside of ourselves. Like the disciples, we bring nothing to the table but foolish questions that betray our desperate need of a Savior, "Is it I?". And into that foolishness, we hear the voice of Emmanuel, God with us, saying "Take eat; this is my body". "Drink from the cup, all of you. For this is **my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.**"

We are passive receivers of the grace Christ has given to us in his death and resurrection. We eat of the bread and drink of the cup placing all of our wants, desires, and needs in the One who has ascended to his rightful place on David's throne. Christ has drunk of the vine. He has established his kingdom. This table, as a feast of the kingdom, is heaven intruding into our space reminding us of who we are and where our destiny lies. Because Christ has saved his people from their sins, this table gives us our identity as a New Covenant people living as a New Creation in Christ's kingdom. Never has there been a finer Christmas feast than the Table spread before us.