

Luke 22:15-20

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 until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.

Matthew 28:16-20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Let me tell you a story. A story of God, and God's people. You have heard parts of this story before, but listen anyway. This story is important.

God's people have lives to live; journeys to walk. We each walk our journey, don't we?

All of us human beings are on a journey called life. The journey started long ago, in the Garden of Eden, long before any of us came around. The journey ends in a beautiful city, the New Jerusalem, but there is a lot of wilderness in between.

All of us who are here today joined the journey in progress. The Kingdom of Heaven is approaching, Jesus said so, but it's been approaching for a long time. We don't know when it will get here, but that's okay. We walk our parts of the journey toward the Kingdom.

We start with our parents, and for a time we walk the paths that they put us on. Eventually we start to choose our own paths, for good and ill.

We have our traveling companions, the people who walk our walk with us. We influence their paths and they influence ours, by teaching, advising, and simply by being there. Most roads are easier to handle if you have people with you, to reassure you and to help you.

God loves God's people very much, and God wants us all to make to the end of the journey, to God's home of many mansions.

About two thousand years ago, God came and walked with us for a time, teaching what kind of roads were best. Best for reaching God's home, but also, and perhaps more importantly, best for traveling the journey. We called him Jesus, or literally, "God saves."¹ Jesus taught anyone who would listen how to walk our journeys and how to live in the Kingdom of Heaven here, even before our journey's end.

Jesus could not walk with us forever, though. To be honest, we wouldn't have it. We tortured him and killed him. But God resurrected him, and he came back to give his disciples final instructions. He walks with us still, even when we don't see him.

Jesus knew that death was coming, so he gave his followers signs by which they would see God's love and God's grace, even when they did not see him walking with them.

In baptism, we take ordinary Columbus municipal tap water, no different here than it is from the tap at your house, and we pray over it. We pray for the Holy Spirit to come with the water. We pray that, "...all who now pass through these waters [would] be delivered from death to life, from bondage to freedom, from sin to righteousness." We pray that God would, "Bind

¹ Literal translation of the Hebrew *Ye-shua*.

them to the household of faith, [and] guard them from all evil. Strengthen them to serve God with joy until the day God makes all things new.”

I pour water into the font, and those of you whom I have baptized can testify that I get a good handful when I put the water on your heads. But I’m not the one doing the important thing here. I’m a supporting actor at best.

God acts in baptism, making a change in who this person is. God “seals the person by the Holy Spirit and marks them as Christ’s own.” When I say sealing a person, I don’t mean sealing them like Tupperware, to keep bad stuff out. This sealing is like the wax seal you might see on a historical document from the Middle Ages, or on a college diploma today. It is a formal signature saying, irrevocably, “This person is a child of the Almighty God.”

In baptism, the person starts their walk with God’s people and with God.

There are promises made at baptism, promises made by the parents of a child or by an adult being baptized. In the case of an adolescent, it may be both. Parents promise to teach a child to walk in the way of Jesus Christ. Adults being baptized promise to walk in the way that Jesus showed us, and to show others that way. In both cases, the whole congregation promises to walk with this person, to guide and nurture them. A few Country singers to the contrary, none of us truly walk alone.

Baptism happens once in a person’s life. God puts God’s seal on a person once. It cannot be revoked or taken away, no matter what you do. A change in your life or a new name does not change who you are, deep down. God sees into the very core of you, and knows you better than you know yourself. When God puts God’s seal on you, adopting you as a child of God, God knows what God is doing and God knows exactly whom God is doing it to.

In baptism, God takes ordinary water and does something extraordinary with it. Some of you may have noticed that I tend to tear up a little when I do a baptism, and that's because of just how astounding this is.

Jesus did not give us only baptism. Baptism is a good thing. It is an amazing thing. But it would not be enough to sustain us through years and years of our journey. So, on the night before he was killed, Jesus gave us another gift.

In the Lord's Supper, or communion, again, I pray, but it is God who truly acts. God takes ordinary bread, made for the purpose by one of our members, and ordinary wine and grape juice, bought at the grocery store, and transforms them and uses them to nourish us for the journey.

As Presbyterians, we do not believe in what is called transubstantiation, the idea that the bread and wine become literally the body and blood of Christ. A scientist with all the tools of science would not be able to tell the difference in the chemical composition of elements that I have said the words over and elements that I have not. But I tell you, Christ is spiritually present in these elements. In the Lord's Supper, Christ nourishes us and sustains us for our journey.

God gave the Hebrew people manna in the wilderness every day as they travelled to the Promised Land. In the same way God gives us spiritual nourishment here, every time we come to this Table. It is evidence that we can see and touch and taste that God loves us.

We used to require that people be baptized before they came to the Lord's Table, thinking that they had to begin their walk properly first. But now the Presbyterian Church as a whole has come to a new understanding, that all adults and children with an age-appropriate understanding,

are welcome at the Lord's Table.² It is a spiritual wilderness out there. Some people need that nourishment before they can get to the point of formally beginning their walk with Christ, and who are we refuse them that?

It is still important that we pray, that we confess our sins and receive assurance of our forgiveness, before we come to the Table. It is still important that we do not come to God's Table bearing a grudge against our brothers or sisters. But beyond that, God's love suffices.

Jesus ate with notorious sinners, people who were outcast from society because of their bad deeds. We can do the same. And it's not our Table, anyway. It's God's. We welcome anyone who needs that spiritual nourishment for their journey to the Lord's Table, because God is the one who issues the invitations, and God issues them far and wide.

We are all walking this journey we call life, and it is part of the journey of God's people from Eden to the New Jerusalem. Our individual stories are all part of that larger story of God and God's people. We will talk next week about the paths we walk in that journey, and the road directions that Jesus gave us in his Sermon on the Mount.

As we are walking that journey, God has given us gifts, signs that we can see and feel and even taste, of the astounding grace that God has given us. God gives us the nourishment we need to walk the walk.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

² In the case of children, it is the parents (or other adult caregivers) who must make the decision whether the child has that age-appropriate understanding. I am available to assist and to teach, but we believe that the parents should know their kids better than their pastor does, and that a parent-child conversation about what the Lord's Supper means is to be encouraged.