

Matthew 26:17
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Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY

March 2, 2022
Ash Wednesday

Matthew 26:17 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.' "

THE CRUCIAL HOURS **"I WILL KEEP THE PASSOVER"**

Dear Friends in Christ,

"It was the crucial game"—you know what that means. It was the one they had to win to get into the playoffs. (I'm not thinking of any particular team or game here. I am thinking of the word "crucial.") "The element of surprise was crucial to their victory." Same thing.

There is another related word that might just help us zero in on the meaning of crucial. That word is "crucible." A crucible is a container, often of clay or ceramic, which can be heated to glowing hot but won't melt. Into the crucible is placed rock or metal. The heat is so intense that the rock or metal melts. Then the liquified impurities are poured off or burned away, and the pure metal remains. The purpose of the crucible is to remove all the impurities.

"The Crucial Hours" is the theme of this Lenten series. This series takes individual events, choices, actions from the closing hours of Jesus' life, and in them we look at how each was a crucial moment. The crucial last hours of Jesus' life, you veteran soldiers of the cross know, were like a crucible. In them, Jesus suffered what none of us could endure. In his sufferings, sometimes also called his Passion, our impurity was cleansed.

Tonight's first crucial moment in the series is indeed crucial, though at first it doesn't sound like it. It is contained in his words, "***I will keep the Passover.***"

This crucial moment was sometime during the Thursday, the day, before Jesus would die. All Jerusalem was abuzz. Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims had flocked to the city for the Passover. Why should everyone come to Jerusalem? Why not celebrate the Passover in the comfort of their home towns? Because the LORD God had declared that the Passover was to be observed in the city where the temple was: Jerusalem (Dt. 16,8,16). For those in Jerusalem, Passover was joyfully and painstakingly observed. It was a day greater than any we have in our calendar. It was sort of like the biggest day of our civil calendar, the Fourth of July, and the biggest day of our religious calendar, Easter, rolled together into a single meal. And, it something God wanted all in the vicinity of Jerusalem to observe.

So, some time early that Thursday, just outside the city walls, Jesus' disciples came to him and asked, "***Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?***" Their question reveals that the centerpiece of the whole Passover was a divinely prescribed meal. And you may remember that the centerpiece of that meal was a

lamb that had been slaughtered, just for the occasion. Jesus told them, ***“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.’”***

And so Lent, which ends so awfully at the cross, begins so unthreateningly/benignly. ***“I will keep the Passover.”***

It doesn't sound like much. Jesus was just doing what thousands were doing that night. In a way, it sounds almost the opposite of crucial, it sounds fun. In fact, many translations translate it, ***“I am going to celebrate the Passover,”*** which is a totally valid translation. God did want the day and the meal to be a joy. They were remembering their nation's ancient release from slavery by the Almighty God.

But Jesus knew something else about the Passover. The centerpiece of the Passover was that lamb, slaughtered at the temple, and that lamb was a picture of him, Jesus the Messiah. Additionally, Jesus was fully aware that like that lamb, he would be slaughtered on the morrow. If you were to realize that a celebration were a foreshadowing of your own personal death—no one, of course, realizing it—I'm not sure how much celebrating you would do.

Perhaps it is better to simply go with an equally valid translation, the one in our bulletin, ***“I will keep the Passover.”*** This hints at one more truth. For Jesus the Passover was not just a celebration, it was also obedience to another of God's many laws. You see, Jesus had come not only to finish his life in a sacrificial death in place of the eternal death I deserve for my sins. He also came to live a perfect life in place of my sin-stained life. In other words, it wasn't just the six hours on the cross that make Jesus my saving substitute, but all thirty-three years of his life.

We call this lifelong obedience Jesus' "Active Obedience" which is something of a parallel to his "Passive Obedience." By Jesus' passive obedience we refer to Jesus suffering and death, which is called passive because he was the victim of the punishment we deserved. But his life of obedience is called active obedience. And active it was because every thought word and deed of his entire life was a conscious and active choice to do what we were supposed to do.

God's Word elsewhere tells us, *“God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law.”* (Gal 4:4) Jesus was under the jurisdiction of the same divine laws that govern our life. And so it was that Jesus said about all of God's requirements, *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”* (Mt 5:17) He came to obey them all! He came to obey the big laws and the little ones; God's requirements about actions and thoughts. And like all the rest of the laws, Jesus would “keep” the Passover.

Not like us. Not like us, who hear a command of God which conflicts with our self-chosen priorities, and we say, “But I have something scheduled. Maybe later.”

Not like us who hear the good that God would have us do, and we say, “But I'm tired.”

Not like us who realize that God's will will actually cost us something and we say,

“Well, when I can afford it.”

Not like us who see the things we want, but that God doesn't, and we think, “Just a little bit won't hurt.”

All of that is sin. It condemns. And Jesus never, not once, made any of those excuses. We do it daily, hourly! He didn't tell white lies, have a cheat day, find somewhere else to be, or any of the other things we do to get away with something we shouldn't. Jesus made himself a slave to God's law, every second of his life.

Jesus' word, “***I will keep the Passover,***” lets us know that Jesus was intent on his mission to save us, beginning to end.

When have you been underappreciated? When you filled all the dresser drawers in the house with freshly laundered clothes, and all anyone said was, “You folded my socks the wrong way!”? When you came home with 100% of the hard earned paycheck directly deposited in the bank and all there were were complaints about not having the stuff the neighbors have? When have you been underappreciated?

Now imagine Jesus. Every moment of his life was devoted to you. There was never an easy chair in his living room. He prayed for those who cursed him, forgave those who had lived reckless lives, helped those who came for no other reason to get something out of him. And Jesus didn't do nice things just for other people. There was an internal righteousness to him, about his relationship to his heavenly Father. He was in the synagogue every week, at the Passover every year, praying every day, bringing honor to God's name every time it crossed his lips.

Dear Jesus, on this Ash Wednesday, help me to love you because you have loved me so much. Teach me to love God's will as much as you did. Let all your words and deeds for me convince me that I have nothing to fear, because you have paid the price for my sin, and lived a perfect life in my place. Amen.