

Sermon Holy Thursday God on Trial: Respite

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

(Psalm 23:5)

Dear disciples of Jesus: Outside the walls of an upper room, the enemies of Jesus are getting ready. The chief priests and teachers of the law have wanted him dead for a long time. Their desire has grown even as Jesus' popularity has grown.

His triumphal entry into Jerusalem added urgency to their scheming, but they haven't been able to do anything because of all the people around him during the Passover Festival.

But now they have Judas on their payroll, and their opportunity could come at any moment. Somewhere out there in the city, they lurk and conspire.

Soon, it will all come to a head: their plot—and God's plan. The next 24 hours will be a whirlwind—the arrest in Gethsemane; trials before Annas and Caiaphas, Pilate, Herod, and Pilate again; the crucifixion and death on Calvary; and the burial in the tomb.

But not yet. Not here. For a few hours in this room, it's just Jesus and his disciples. How he has longed for this moment!

This time with his disciples is precious to him. As their brother in the flesh, Jesus loves to be among his Father's family. During his ministry, he looked for time alone with his disciples.

Later this Thursday evening, as Jesus prays in anguish in the garden, he'll bring three disciples along and insist that they watch and pray with him—he'll be disappointed when they don't.

Outside this upper room his enemies lie in wait, but inside Jesus is with his disciples.

It's more than that, of course. Jesus and his disciples are not just hanging out. They've gathered to celebrate the Passover—to remember the night the Lord rescued the Israelites from Egypt.

You remember: The Lord said he would strike down all the firstborns in the land. He commanded his people to celebrate a special meal: to slaughter a young lamb without defect, roast and eat it, and brush its blood on their doorframes.

That night destruction came to every house in Egypt—death to every first born, people and animals—but the Lord passed over the houses of the Israelites.

Inside their homes, protected by that blood and gathered around that special meal, God's people were safe—and the Lord led them out of slavery.

Every year, God's faithful people—Jesus and his disciples included—celebrated that meal. The meal not only remembered what God did for his people in the past also looked ahead.

That flawless lamb was a picture of the perfect Lamb of God, the Christ, who would be sacrificed for his people, whose blood would protect them from God's wrath, and who would give them freedom from their slavery to sin and death.

This meal had been celebrated for well over a thousand years, but not until this generation was the true Passover Lamb of God there in the flesh to celebrate with his people!

Even so, we haven't hit on the best part of this night. What Jesus does with his disciples isn't a new twist on an old tradition; it's the introduction of something never seen before.

On this night for the first time, Jesus bequeaths to his people his true body and blood, the very things he'll give in death the next day.

On this night, he declares a new covenant, the new pact God will make with sinners—sealed with Jesus' blood shed on the cross—a promise of forgiveness through faith.

In this room, Jesus institutes a meal that will be celebrated not just every year but every week and more for the next two thousand years and counting.

In this meal, he gives his disciples something to strengthen them for the dreadful events they're about to experience and the work they'll carry out the rest of their lives.

No wonder Jesus has been eagerly desiring to eat this meal with his disciples before he suffers!

Yet even as Jesus has been looking forward to this moment, he is also looking beyond it.

He tells his disciples he will not eat this meal again **“until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God.”** He adds that he **“will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.”**

The kingdom of God is the rule of God in and with his people—in grace now and in glory forever.

The Old Testament prophets and Jesus himself spoke of that relationship between God and his people in his kingdom as a festive fellowship meal.

This communion is made possible by Jesus' life and death and culminates in what the Bible describes as a heavenly banquet, an eternal feast of joy and peace where no enemies will be found, just God and his people forever.

How we long to take our places at that table!

Right now, though—right now—enemies are everywhere. The people of the world rise up to put God and his people on trial. They stand in judgment over God's good gifts.

They ridicule the words God has given us and conspire to prevent those words from influencing our culture or our children.

They judge us to be out of touch and are happy to exclude us, or they do all they can to *include* us in their sin.

Worst of all is our archenemy, the devil, with his evil forces—always prowling and crouching around every corner, ready to pounce. All around us, hostile forces lurk and conspire.

That's why it's so good for us to be in God's house, with God's people! Not that we don't bring sin with us.

Those doors aren't some kind of airlock that keeps spiritual contaminants out. Where there are sinners, there is sin.

Sin was in that upper room in the hearts of the twelve men who dined with Jesus, including one who would betray him. We drag our guilt in here with us for all the times we've been easy prey for our greatest enemy. We carry in our doubts and fears.

That's why we need to be here tonight! In this room, Jesus gathers us to assure us that his blood covers our sins and shields us from God's anger.

He reminds us that the kingdom belongs to him—that he has perfect control over all events and power over all enemies. When you hear God's Word here, Jesus speaks to your hearts just as if he were sitting across the table from you.

But Jesus doesn't just speak across the table; he invites you to the table.

Here, he gives you the very body that he took on when he came into this world, the body in which he served his Father perfectly, the body he gave into death on the cross. He gives you the blood he shed, the blood that established a new covenant.

This isn't like the covenant the Lord made with the Israelites at Mount Sinai, sealed with the blood of bulls, a contract that the people broke.

This is an unbreakable pact, a promise of forgiveness through faith, sealed with the blood of the Lamb of God.

Tonight, Jesus gives you this invitation: “***Come to my table. Let’s celebrate a special meal together. I’ve already made all the preparations; there’s nothing you need to do. The food is ready. The drink is prepared.***”

It is my body; it is my blood. Let me serve you. Let me strengthen you for the struggle of tomorrow. How eagerly I desire for you to eat this meal with me!”

Let your enemies rage all around; here, at this moment, at this table, it’s just you and Jesus.

Of course, it’s not just *you* individually but all of us together. Here, we also enjoy communion with one another. As Jesus gathers us to himself, he gathers us together in one body.

To your right and your left, here at Jesus’ Table, are your brothers and sisters, who are facing the same enemies, needing the same divine strength, and receiving the same forgiveness with you.

If the perfect Son of God in the flesh valued fellowship with his people, how much more should we sinners treasure it!

If this life is like a courtroom where the world puts God and his people on trial, think of this Supper as a recess, a respite.

Jesus ushers you into a quiet room where there are no accusations, no prosecutors, no hostile witnesses—only faithful supporters and the promise of a victorious outcome.

How eagerly we desire to eat this meal! Here, we find peace. Here, we stand in the presence of God. Here, we are surrounded by his people. Here it's like ... heaven. Amen.

To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, forever and ever! Amen.

(Revelation 5:13)