

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Eric Howell
A Communion Meditation
Christmas Day
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What's Christmas all about? People have lots and lots of answers to that question. For Christians, it's pretty simple: Christmas is the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, the Son of God, the cosmic intrusion by the Creator into creation. This is the holy day of God becoming one of us so we could become like God. That's the way it was said centuries ago. When we celebrate all of that, we are celebrating the love of God because God came to us. Another writer centuries ago, said that if Christ had been only God and not human, we couldn't have known him because God remains unknowable. If Christ has only been human and not been God, he could be good but he couldn't save us. Because he is fully God and fully human, he is the way God saves us and shows us what it means to be fully human. When we stand to confess the Nicene Creed at the end of our service today, that's what is going on there. We're joining all of those in the past and all over the world today reaching for words to say out loud the mystery of God whom we know through Jesus Christ.

Christmas is the celebration of the birth of Christ—that's what Christmas is all about. But what is it also about? Presents? Yes, for sure. Some people say it's all about presents, but I don't think that's right. The music? Certainly. There are whole genres of music for Christmas: classical, liturgical, nostalgic, annoying. Lots of music. Christmas is about presents and music but, in the end, as we celebrate Jesus, it's really about the food. Your family may have special traditions for Christmas breakfast or Christmas lunch or Christmas cookies and they may be different, but Christmas present and Christmas memories are about the food as much as anything else. That's true in church life, too, especially in the great tradition of the church when Advent was a long season of fasting that breaks open on Christmas with a feast for the ages. Humans celebrate with food. Thanks be to God.

Today we celebrate the birth of Christ. The Word took on flesh and dwelt among us. What better way is there to celebrate the incarnation of our Lord than to meet him at the Table? At the Table-- in the giving and receiving of ordinary bread and cup, the ordinary bread and cup, if I may be so bold, take on Spirit and become for us as the body and blood of Christ.

Communion, it is said, is a sacramental act by which God's mysterious presence is made known to us through material means. And in communion—the breaking open of the bread, the pouring of the cup, we re-enact in the Spirit our calling to share our lives as Christ with one another and the world. St. Paul said we are to have the mind of Christ within us: he who did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped but emptied himself to the form of a man, even a servant, even to death on a cross. From there God raised him up that every knee should bow and every tongue confess Jesus Christ is Lord.

The ritual act of sharing of this bread and cup at communion forms us as the body of Christ. Our lives are broken open for the world and poured out in the love of God. All of this is grace, this gift, this calling. We don't earn our way to the table, getting an admission ticket somewhere along the way for our good deeds or our tremendous faith; we're invited here by grace, even those who have some regrettable deeds or unsure faith. That's why we all come humbly with cupped hands.

Sharing communion might seem out of place on Christmas Day if you only think of it as recalling Jesus' last supper with his disciples at the end of his life. That's the night he said, "do this in memory of me" and washed feet, broke bread, and poured wine for his friends before he died. When we celebrate communion, we remember this.

But here's the key, our use of the word 'memory' is weaker than he intended it to be. For us, memory means simply calling something to mind, like the birth of a child or a wedding day, or the last time the Cowboys made the playoffs or something. A memory like that can stir deep feelings but not a lot more. The Hebrew concept and Jesus' concept were so much more. To remember something 'meant to recall and ritually reenact it so as to make it present again in a real way. (Rolheiser, "The Real Presence")"

There's a commercial for something on tv now, probably a soft drink or something, but the short story that unfolds in the commercial is gold. A man is fumbling in the kitchen trying to bake a pie while his mother looks on, gesturing to him how to fold the dough, how to mix the apple filling. Her presence is right there with him encouraging him, correcting him, sometimes giving him the stink-eye when he spills something. In the end, his pie comes out of the oven quite a mess, lopsided, just kind of a hot mess, but then he turns, walks into the dining room, and sets it on the table that is surrounded by family and friends who are there. He sets the pie on the table, and as he does, he looks up to a picture of his mom on the wall and nods at it as if to say thank you. And you realize she has died, and he's making her famous apple pie. As he did, she was with him. It won't be perfect, but it's a re-enactment, a re-participation of her love manifested in this iconic food on Christmas day. For a commercial, it's really a nice picture of ritual, remembrance, and how we recall and reenact something and it becomes present to us again in a real way. Food does that for us. The table does that for us in a particular way.

For the best example, when our Jewish friends celebrate the Passover meal, the meal recalls Moses' leading Israel in the exodus through the Red Sea to freedom, but in re-enacting the event ritually at Passover each year the event is made present again for those at the table to experience. This is all a mystery. Communion is the same way except the saving event we reenact to remake present through ritual is the death and resurrection of Jesus. We are not just mentally recalling an event on a calendar date from sometime in the past, we are actually making it present to participate in. We are making present the central saving event in Christian history. *Do this in remembrance of me.* That's what he meant by remembrance. Take this bread and this cup. Break open the bread; pour the wine; share with one another, and make present and participate in my life and salvation every time you do.

So, this is what Christians have experienced and believed about what happens at worship. When we worship together, today, on any day, Christ is here. Christ is really present to us in the Word through the reading of scripture, the preaching, the music. Christ is really present to us in our prayers shared together and in the silence we hold when we don't know what words to pray. Christ is really present to us in the giving and receiving of the bread and cup. And Christ is really present to us in the saving event of his sacrificial passing from death to life—the saving event made present here again this day.

But even Christmas? This might sound like it's all talk is about death and sacrifice, whereas Christmas is about babies and manglers and the birth. The two might be kept separated. But we see now this is the gift for us today, we who give and receive in God's grace the gift of this Table. Even on Christmas, maybe especially then, Communion anchors us into celebrating Christ, who lived, died, and lives again. Without anchors, we can drift into celebrating sentimentality or lovely things or traditions. But here, we are anchored to Christ.

Maybe it's the music that helps save us, that helps anchor us theologically, as is often the case. Hymn writers and Christmas carol poets have already given us this gift—the gift of a Christmas carol anchored in the whole gospel. Lots of them do. Singing some of these songs is a ritual at Christmas time that, if we're paying attention, invites us deeper into Christ's life from Christmas to the Upper Room to the cross and Easter morning and to Christ's presence with us here. The songs don't shy away from the cross, nor our need for it, even at the foot of the manger.

Here are a few examples:

What Child is This?:

*Nails, spears shall pierce him through, the cross be borne for me, for you.
Hail, hail the Word made flesh, the Babe, the Son of Mary.*

Joy to the World:

*No more let sins and sorrow grow nor thorns infest the ground,
he comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found.*

It may be *O Little Town of Bethlehem* that brings us closest to the Table:

*No ear may hear his coming but in this world of sin,
where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in.*

*O holy child of Bethlehem descend to us we pray,
cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell,
o come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel.*

Communion is not just the moment for a somber, solemn, pious fixation on the Lord's last supper. It is a moment for true, full-hearted, gospel, grace-filled, life-changing Christmas feast of joy.

And so we come. To meditate on communion is to bring our whole self before the whole gospel of grace made present here in these signs of salvation. So now, let us come. Let us come to the Table, with open hands, to give and receive, and remember and participate, in the mysterious way God is with us even now, as we ponder and remember Emmanuel born to us and in us again this day.

Thanks be to God.

Let us prepare our hearts to come and receive.

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