

The Bread of the Presence©

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Leviticus 24:5-9; John 6:26-40

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I'm going to ask you to use your imagination for a little while as we go back ... way back to the Old Testament days ... back to the time when the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness.

You are among a large community of people who have been through all sorts of ordeals ... some were caused by enemies ... and some ... you contributed to. You remember the great exodus out of Egypt where you and all your people were slaves, treated with great injustice and oppression. Your memory holds things like the night before you left Egypt ... the blood of a lamb smeared on the door so that the angel of death would pass over your house ... eating unleavened bread in order to leave quickly ... there was no time for it to rise. You remember the terrible wailing of the Egyptians when they discovered so many of their children who had died.

Your heart beats faster as you think of running away with all your possessions and your family and coming to the Red Sea, the army of Pharaoh approaching from behind. You are once again amazed at how the sea opened up a pathway and all of you crossed to safety, the water folding itself back in over the army.

You remember complaining to Moses ... the one God chose to be your leader ... that you were all hungry. Your fear and anxiety rising up as your hunger began to increase. And the next morning there was manna ... a sort of bread ... spread over the desert ... just the right portion for each of you to have for a day ... every single day. God had saved you, and still was saving you, by providing food. (Ex. 16)

There is also the shameful memory of throwing in your jewelry and other pieces of gold into the fire to help make an idol to worship. So much for the God who had saved you! After all ... Moses had disappeared into the mountains and you had decided he was not coming back. And in your impatience and fear, you helped form a new god, a golden calf, so you would have something to worship.

And oh what a memory it is to think of Moses coming down from that mountain with the commandments that Yahweh ... the one true God ... had given him for all of you ... the writing on the stone tablets written by God himself. Moses was so furious, he threw the stone tablets with the commandments down at the foot of the mountain and they were broken. And Moses, his anger seething, picked up the golden calf and threw it in the fire, ground it to powder, scattered the powder on the water, and made each of you drink it. (Ex. 32:15-20)

Oh, what a shameful memory that is!

And God was ready to be finished with you all, but Moses pleaded with God to have mercy and to not give up on you. So, because of Moses pleading, God, for a second time, wrote the 10 commandments ... God's laws ... on tablets of stone.

And in your memory is the careful building of the tabernacle ... the Tent of Meeting ... according to the very specific instructions God himself had given to Moses. It is the place to encounter God, to meet with God.

The measurements were precise, the structure and order ... exact. The gate in which you entered faced the east, there was the courtyard and inside was the alter for the burnt sacrifices ... the place to offer an atonement for sins.

Of course, further inside was the holy place and even further ... the holy of holies where the Mercy Seat was kept on top of the Ark that held the 10 commandments. That was the place to truly encounter the presence of God. But then, only the priests were allowed to go that far. Only the priests ... not even Moses ... could go into either of the holy places. But you know that inside that holy place is a special table that holds very special loaves of bread ... The Bread of the Presence.

Now ... imagine that you are Aaron, one of the high priests ... and that you have been ordained to enter into this special place. When you go in, you find the special table, made of acacia wood and overlaid with gold, with a gold molding all around it. And on the table are 12 loaves of bread ... one representing each of the 12 tribes of Israel ... stacked one on top of the other, six on each side ... and on the very top of each stack is a bowl with pure frankincense burning as a memorial sacrifice to the Lord.

Only you, as the priest, and your family ... are allowed to eat the bread in a holy place and the bread is to be a perpetual thank offering to the Lord, with freshly baked loaves placed on the table each Sabbath day.

Of course, you know that the term Bread of the Presence also says that God is present in this place. The very word "Presence" in Hebrew means "the face." The face of God ... the countenance of God ... is present here.

It is an awesome responsibility to be a high priest, standing in this holy place, representing the people and responsible for the atonement of all their sins.

Now, we come to our own table ... the place where we also say God is present. Remember how Jesus told his disciples ... "I am the Bread of Life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty"?

In the Gospel of John, chapter 6, after Jesus fed the 5,000 with only 5 loaves of bread, he then talked about the manna that God rained down from heaven for the Israelites. The people who ate that manna obviously still died. But, he said, speaking of himself,

‘this is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.’

You see, the old covenant God made with Moses and the people ... that they would keep God’s commandments and God would be their God, required the people keep the law. The priests had rigid rules and only the priests could come into the presence of God.

That is, until God himself came to dwell with the people. The first chapter of John says, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Did you know that that word for “dwelt” also means ... pitched his tent, or “tabernacled among us?” God, in the form of Jesus, the man, came to live among humans. Humans knew the love of God in Jesus, his Son. Humans experienced the presence of God in Jesus Christ.

And we know that Christ Jesus gave his life as a sacrifice for the sins of all people. Finally, the one who is the High Priest is also the sacrifice. The one who sacrificed himself for us, is the very one who also provides the mercy and forgiveness for us. In this act, we find a *new* covenant. It is a new promise, a new agreement with God. We accept this grace ... this forgiveness provided in God’s son, Jesus. We believe in Him with our whole heart and we commit to serve and follow him. And that is all we can do. We cannot earn our forgiveness, yet, it has been done for us by God Himself.

And in that new covenant, we have been made children of God, heirs with Christ to the Kingdom of God. We read in 1 Peter 2:9, “... *you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praise of him who calls you out of darkness into his wonderful light!*”

Jesus Christ is the High Priest, who has stood responsible for our sins, and we are his family and little priests because we belong to him. We have the authority to approach the presence of God ... because of Jesus Christ!

And we ... at least we who are Presbyterians ... have believed that this table is not *just* a memorial to the death of Christ. It is a place where Christ Jesus is *present*. We have said that it is not that the bread or the wine literally becomes the flesh and blood of Jesus, as some of our Christian friends do believe, but that because the Holy Spirit is powerful, we do have the presence of Christ here with us in a very meaningful and special way.

And it is not just by eating this bread and by drinking this cup that we are nourished, but it is in the actual *breaking* of the bread and *pouring* of the wine that we find our faith nourished and our spirits nurtured and strengthened as we remember the body that was broken and the blood that was poured out for us.

It is a past, present and future celebration as we partake of this holy food that is provided by Christ himself. We remember with thanksgiving what he did in the past, what he is doing for us right now, and what he will do in his coming in the future.

The tabernacle was a sanctuary for the presence of God. “And the Word became flesh and tabernacled (made his sanctuary) among us.” Now, *we* are the living sanctuaries ... the place where God dwells ... in us! We have this gift of sacrament ... an outward, visible representation of the living, invisible grace of God that abides in each of us.

The Bread of the Presence is here among you - the bread of life, living in *you* – God’s holy tabernacle.

*“... thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him. For **we** are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing.”*

To Jesus Christ, who loves us
and freed us from our sins by his blood
and made us to be a kingdom,
priests of his God and Father,
to him be glory and dominion forever and ever.

Amen.

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