

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT | FEBRUARY 21, 2021

GENESIS 9:8-17 | PSALM 25:1-10 | 1 PETER 3:18-22 | MARK 1:9-15

In this season of Lent, we're creating some space to think through communion. If you were here on Wednesday, we talked a little bit about how the way we celebrate the Eucharist communicates something about our theology. If you want to know what some church believes about God, don't look at their exhaustive confession of faith or their slick brochures or what they tell you they believe. Look at how they celebrate the Eucharist, and you can learn quite a lot.

Communion is all about promise and covenant, which is fitting because so is today's reading from the end of the flood story in Genesis. We are only a few chapters into Genesis, and humanity has already grown so rebellious and obstinate that God chooses to wipe the slate clean and start anew. So God has Noah and his family ride out this flood in an ark.

People often wince at this story because it makes God sound indifferent and callous. Fair enough. But when you actually read the story, you notice that God might agree with that assessment. In today's reading, God seems to realize that perhaps this flood was too much, that it went too far. And so God promises never again to flood the earth and puts a bow in the sky as a sign that the waters "will never again be a sign to destroy all flesh." It's almost like God is still figuring out how to be in relationship with people, and so this new covenant is a way of moving forward.

This probably sounds relatively familiar so far. But notice who this covenant is made with. "When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." God's promise is with every living creature. Not just with Noah. Not just with Noah's family. Not just with humanity. But with every living creature. God takes an interest in and forms a covenant not just with people but with all of creation.

So what does a promise God makes to be in the Eucharist have to do with a promise God makes to a bunch of animals and plants in Genesis? Well, everything. In fact, the idea that the covenant of God we celebrate in the Eucharist involves all of creation isn't some radically new idea, but it's embedded so deeply in our liturgy that we often pass over it without noticing. Our hymn of praise invites the assembly to *Sing with all the people of God | And join in the hymn of all creation*. One of our most commonly used Eucharistic prayers ends *With the earth and all its creatures, with sun and moon and stars, we praise you, O God, blessed and holy Trinity, now and forever. Amen*. Our offering prayer for Christmas includes the line, *With the trees of the field, with all earth and heaven, we shout for joy at the coming of your Son*.¹

What you notice in all of those is not just that creation is good for humanity or helps us survive. If that was true, God wouldn't have called creation "good" until humans showed up. But the imagery is of creation actively praising God. And why wouldn't it? It's part of a covenant with God just like us. As Pope Francis puts it in *Laudato Si*, "Joined to the incarnate Son, present in the Eucharist, the whole cosmos gives thanks to God."²

If we believe that the Eucharist is a foretaste of the feast to come, if we believe it brings us into the kingdom of God, if we believe that it manifests God's promises in the world, then it

¹ *ELW* p. 101, 133. The Christmas offering prayer is only in the leader's edition, so just take my word for it.

² Pope Francis, "Laudato Si," accessed February 17, 2021, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html. John Paul II put it this way. "This varied scenario of celebrations of the Eucharist has given me a powerful experience of its universal and, so to speak, cosmic character. Yes, cosmic! Because even when it is celebrated on the humble altar of a country church, the Eucharist is always in some way celebrated on the altar of the world." Pope John Paul II, "Ecclesia de Eucharistia," accessed February 17, 2021, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_20030417_eccle-de-euch.html.

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concerns not just the people in the pews but the creation that sustains our lives as well. That just as you become who you truly are at God's table, creation becomes what it truly is when it joins in God's praises.

So it's worth thinking about how creation is present in our own celebration of the Eucharist. Does the way we celebrate communion convey that we are joining in the hymn of all creation? Or is it just another thing we're doing in church?

The most accessible starting point here is in the elements themselves, bread and wine. We tend to have lots of banal arguments over how much gluten has to be in bread for it to count as bread and whether we should offer wine, juice, juice and wine, non-alcoholic wine, or all of the above. The more generative question for us to think about is whether the elements we use in worship convey the giftedness of creation. Do the elements we use in communion and the way they are presented convey that these are gifts from God's creation?

Let's use bread as an example. Bread is an important element not just because it's relatively common and inexpensive, but because it is gathered and transformed by human hands. One of our offering prayers beautifully phrases it this way. "As grains of wheat scattered upon the hills were gathered together to become one bread, so let your church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom." The symbolism here is that wheat in the fields that is scattered across the earth becomes one in the body of Christ just like we who are scattered across creation but brought together by the Holy Spirit at Christ's table.

So whenever we celebrate communion, we shouldn't just be asking what the most convenient way to celebrate the sacrament is, although sometimes convenience carries the day³, but we should also be asking how our celebration communicates the transformation and redemption of all creation. Does the bread that we use in the Eucharist actually look like bread that has been gathered from the fields? Or has it been processed into something that looks like a hockey puck? Does our communion bread get moldy when you leave it out for a week? Or can it sit on a shelf for years? Does our Eucharistic celebration acknowledge that we are dependent on creation? Or does it suggest that we live apart from it?

If you traveled around the synod, I think you would find that the way we celebrate communion doesn't reflect that cosmic celebration. And I would include my own practices in that, too. Our practices are often centered more on what is convenient for us rather than what is significant in the sacrament. Wafers that look nothing like bread.⁴ Liquid candles that hide the passage of time. Prayers that talk about creation only in the context of natural disaster. Whether it is rainy or sunny, drought or monsoon, summer or winter or springtime or harvest, everything looks pretty much the same. If you asked our Eucharistic celebrations convey about our theology of creation, the answer would probably be, "Not much."⁵

It's easy to write this stuff off as symbolism that doesn't really matter. But the way we use symbols shapes what we value and prioritize. I think I shared this story before in a newsletter or

³ Personal excuse. I often resort to opting for cheap solutions in church that are environmentally irresponsible and symbolically shallow when it saves me time and I'm trying to get people's buy-in on other things. So log in my own eye, etc., etc.

⁴ Personal recommendation. Part of the reason people prefer wafers is that doing intinction with bread doesn't really work since the bread tends to break into little pieces when you get it wet. Basically, the problem with our bread is that it's too much like bread. The obvious solution to this is just not to practice intinction since it is logistically awkward and impossibly unhygienic.

⁵ Personal opinion. In my experience, churches with the most progressive and responsible environmental practices bake their own communion bread. I would guess that the process of making the communion bread reinforces the fact that we depend on food as a gift of the earth, and it doesn't just present itself for our consumption.

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something, but one of my colleagues in the area was working on setting up liturgies in his parking lot last summer.⁶ And his congregants really wanted to find a way to celebrate communion while observing the social distancing guidelines. So they settled on these individually packaged cups where you have a pre-filled communion cup sealed up with a wafer on top and the whole thing is sealed up again and available in boxes of 500 for \$99.99.⁷

And you know what? It works. People get wine. People get some sort of bread-adjacent product. But after the service, he realized that communion had created this enormous bag of garbage stuffed with all these single-use plastics. If communion is just about getting some bread and wine so you can have your personal sins forgiven, no big deal. But if communion is where we join in the hymn of all creation, then you have to imagine the trees of the field are not clapping their hands.⁸

So whenever we gather at Christ's table, we should remember this flood story. Remember that God's promises are never just about getting us out of the world but aimed at the redemption of all God's creation. Because when the Holy Spirit gathers us into the body of Christ, we are transformed alongside the entire work of God's hand. We are just one voice in the cosmic choir that sings that hymn of all creation. *Heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest.*

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

⁶ Personal observation. Being forced to move liturgies outside because of covid has forced us to think more deeply about how our faith depends on and interacts with the environment. I think many clergy, me included, didn't realize how disjointed liturgy was from the environment until we went outside. I suppose part of this is also because when you have liturgies outside, you have to give up your sense of control.

⁷ Personal rant. I understand why people have used individually wrapped communion elements during the pandemic, but it boggles the mind that these were regularly used even before that as regular practice. Why? They are more expensive, more wasteful, and more cumbersome.

⁸ Personal caveat. The point here isn't that churches should never produce any waste. The point is more that we often don't see or think about the amount of waste we create. Looking at that bag of garbage, it's hard not to ask if the world would be more reflective of the kingdom of God if they just hadn't had any communion at all.

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