

## FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT | MARCH 21, 2021

JEREMIAH 31:31-34 | PSALM 51:1-12 | HEBREWS 5:5-10 | JOHN 12:20-33

This is the final week of our Lenten series on the Eucharist. And I've enjoyed it so much that I've thought about just doing it for the rest of the year.

As we've travelled through this season of Lent, we've heard stories of God's covenants, stories of God's promises. The promise to Noah and all creation. The promise to Abraham, Sarah, and their descendants. The promise to Moses and the Israelites.<sup>1</sup> And with each of those promises comes a symbol, a sign. A tangible reminder of this covenant that is meant to help you remember God's promises to you. Noah and the rainbow. Abraham and circumcision. Moses and sabbath.

We might be tempted to write off this pairing of promise and symbol as a biblical curiosity, but we do the same thing in our own lives as well. When you go to a wedding, the couple exchanges vows and then they do what? Exchange rings. When you go to summer camp, kids promise that they'll be best friends forever and then give each other friendship bracelets. If you've been in scouting, you probably said the oath promising to be a good scout and then wore a neckerchief to remind you of your responsibilities.

Do you need these symbols? Of course not. You can be married to someone and not wear a wedding ring. You can be BFFs with someone and not wear a friendship bracelet. You can tie a knot and make a fire without wearing a neckerchief. We use symbols not because they make something true, but because they help us trust in the promises others make to us and remember the promises we've made to others.

Symbols are powerful. But sometimes symbols become so powerful that we forget what they even stood for in the first place. Instead of pointing us toward a promise, they become ends in themselves. If you read the prophets like Jeremiah, Micah, and Amos, you see that this is at the heart of their criticism of public life. It is a culture full of symbols and rituals, but they've been drained of their meaning. The prayers are said the right way, the Sabbath is kept, the rituals done, but the poor are sold for a pair of sandals, the foreigners are scapegoated, and the laborers are exploited and underpaid.<sup>2</sup> The Israelites have become enthralled by preserving and maintaining the order of these symbols and stopped caring about the promises they are meant to support.

And sure enough, God shares the prophet's judgement. God declares, "I took [the Israelites] by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt--a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD." It isn't just the prophets who think the Israelites have lost their way. God thinks so, too.

This is all relatively straight forward so far. God makes a covenant. People break the covenant. God says, *Let's try it again*. But something else happens that makes this text much more interesting. That Israelite society gets sacked. The buildings get town down. The temple is leveled. The people get deported. They go into diaspora. And the symbols that they cared so much about are destroyed. The symbols that gave them a sense of identity and meaning are gone.

So this new covenant God makes is going to need a different kind of symbol. A symbol that can't be destroyed by the Babylonians. A symbol that can't be melted into jewelry. A symbol that won't be shattered by rod and spear. And, most important, a symbol that can't overshadow the promise it comes with. So how does God put it? I will write it on their hearts. So that no matter where they are, no matter what they're going through, no matter what comes next, my covenant will always be near to them.

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<sup>1</sup> Given the trajectory of the season, Lent IV should probably be the promise to David (not the serpent on the pole), but the lectionary doesn't include that for inexplicable reasons. I don't know.

<sup>2</sup> Amos 8:6, Ezekiel 47:22, Jeremiah 22:13

Which brings us here to table. Because when Jesus says, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin,” it’s Jeremiah’s new covenant that he’s talking about. These symbols, bread and wine, communicate and convey the grace of God to us in tangible, everyday forms. They are the symbol that goes with the promise. They are the symbols that help us remember, believe, and trust in God’s promise to be present with us.

But we can still get symbol and promise mixed up. There’s a funny line in Luther’s Small Catechism where he has an imaginary conversation with someone, probably one of his kids, who asks, “How can bodily eating and drinking [bring about forgiveness of sin, life and salvation]? And Luther replies, I imagine an eye roll here, “Eating and drinking certainly do not do it, but rather the words that are recorded: ‘given for you’ and ‘shed for you for the forgiveness of sin.’” The bread and wine matter, but they only matter insofar as they help us believe in God’s promises. Which is just another way of saying *Don’t confuse the symbol with the promise*. After all, symbols don’t last. They get torn down. They wear out. They get lost or misplaced. But God’s covenants can’t be destroyed or revoked.

This is all perfectly fine and good so far. It’s also, personal opinion, sort of a boring way to end a sermon series. So here’s one more fun bank shot. The symbols that we use in the Eucharist, bread and wine, are not just symbols that we look at and go, “Oh, yea. I look at this symbol and it reminds me of this promise.”<sup>3</sup> But these symbols actually become a part of us. They make and sustain our life. The symbol of the meal isn’t just something that you could sort of hold at arm’s reach, but it is actually a part of you. It makes your life possible. It is present in every act, every breath, every step. To use Jeremiah’s language, the symbol and the promise are so close to you that it’s written on your heart.

You’ve probably noticed this language in our liturgies before when we talk about communion “strengthening us for service” or “empowering us for mission.” This language often comes off as a little dramatic. It’s hard to feel strengthened by a wafer. But in the early church when communion was more of an actual meal, something that got you through your day, it’s easy to see how that language came about. You can understand why it resonated with people. That you would leave the gathering feeling not only spiritually nourished by physically empowered to go about living your vocation. And forming our lives as a symbol that points other people to the kingdom of God present in the world. The symbol in the meal is the bread and wine, but the symbol in the world is you.

This is probably a good reminder for us now that we haven’t been in the church building for a year. Part of what we’ve had to navigate is being church together when we don’t have the same symbols as we normally do. It used to be (relatively) easy to come to church and feel like you were part of a community because you were surrounded by a whole bunch of people. It was easy to pray because we provide an environment with stained glass and candles and imagery and music. It was easy to mark time because we have a calendar and paraments and a liturgical schedule that you can learn and follow. But now we don’t have those things. Do the promises of God still exist? Yea, of course. But sometimes they’re harder to remember when we don’t have all those signs and symbols, reminders and reinforcements all around us.

And if you have found it difficult, and I know that some of you have, then remember that this meal, this bread and cup, form your life as a symbol of the kingdom of God. If you think that there are no signs of God’s presence in the world, then remember that your witness is a sign for someone else. If it feels difficult to remember the promises of God without all those symbols, remember that here at table, you become a symbol of the body of Christ. So your life points people to the kingdom of God, too. And that formed together as the body of Christ at table, the promises of God are written on our hearts so that the love of God might be imprinted on the world.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

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<sup>3</sup> This is part of why we don’t really practice adoration of the Eucharist in the Lutheran tradition.