

The Sense of Christmas: Taste and See
Jubilee Mennonite Church
Advent 2018 Year C Week 1
Bryce Miller

Purpose: To unite this time of memory to the incarnated reality of God with us.

Message: Jesus come to us as what we need through the ordinary elements of day-to-day living, nourishing beyond our expectation.

Scripture: Matthew 26:20-30 (Focus Text); Isaiah 9:1-7 (Please read/have read)

Synopsis: Christmas is a season of the senses. Our memories are often populated with experiences of the wide variety of experiences that have made this season through the years. Often it only takes being in proximity to the familiar sensations of the season to take us back to those moments of sense.

But what of the first Christmas? They too were moments of sense in glorious and mundane ways. The taste of travel food, the eventual sharing of the meal of memory with his Friends as Jesus went about the work of incarnation, the sights of angels on high, the smell of animals in the manger; of diapers of the new born; the touch of rough straw and extravagant gifts. Our hallmarkification of the events of the time would have us filter this out to only that which is clean, welcome and reverent. Yet, Incarnation, God with us, some through the reality of all of our senses, asking us time and again to anticipate God with us even here.

Matthew 26:20-30

20 When it was evening,
Jesus took his place with the twelve;
21 and while they were eating,
he said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me."

22 And they became greatly distressed
and began to say to him one after another,
"Surely not I, Lord?"

23 He answered,
"The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me.

24 The Son of Man goes as it is written of him,
but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed!
It would have been better for that one not to have been born."

25 Judas, who betrayed him, said, "Surely not I, Rabbi?"
He replied, "You have said so."

26 While they were eating,
Jesus took a loaf of bread,
and after blessing it he broke it,
gave it to the disciples, and said,

"Take, eat; this is my body."

27 Then he took a cup,
and after giving thanks he gave it to them,
saying, "Drink from it, all of you;
28 for this is my blood of the covenant,
which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

29 I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine
until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

30 When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Its beginning to look a lot like Christmas. And smell. And sound. And feel. And taste. This is a season that leads with the senses. While most of us have long since forgotten the favorite toy that we received in childhood, and have hidden the Christmas sweater from a few years ago, chances are it does not take a great deal of prompting to bring back the Christmases of yester year by way of the senses. The treats of a goody bag. The smell of Christmas dinner. The sounds of carolling all around, and simply of family gathered. The feel of the cold of the air, the needles of the Christmas tree you set up, the stick of Christmas Orange. And then there is the tastes. The endless varieties of chocolates and sweets, roast meats and, of course dashes of pumpkin spice everywhere. It seems like our Christmas taste pallet extends at least as long as the ubiquitous Christmas music from Halloween onward, when we sprinkle cinnamon, allspice, anis, and peppermint onto anything that will stand still. I am willing to bet that if you grew up with them, the tastes we had this morning connects you with the Christmas spirit as quickly and as completely as any jingling bells ever did. When we speak of Christmas, we are often speaking with our senses.

Christmas is marked by sensory events, moments of experience and connection that become very important to hold on to. In this season of incarnation, of celebrating the coming of God with us, we are invited to sit with the moments of the senses—incarnational moments each one as they fill our bodies and our minds with the presence and the import of that day, this time, and the memories we hold around all that it represents. We are not given to remembering information. Even recalling a phone number long enough to transfer from the paper to the phone can be a challenge. Instead, we remember through our senses—the inputs of how we experience the world and live our lives. We remember—literally put back together—our moments of incarnation—some good, some bad—mainly through the sensory experience that goes with the experience. Try as we may to clean up Christmas—whether the first Christmas with Jesus, the wise men, Shepherds and all the rest of the nativity set, or our own personal experiences, they remain real events, full of experiences both fair and foul, glorious revelation and outright messes alike, all mixed together to be experienced yet again in memory, inviting us to tune our senses up to meet the coming Christ again for the first time. We are going to be using our senses, the stuff of our very incarnation, to connect to the coming of God with us in this season, reminding ourselves of what was then, and attuning our minds to what is now.

I wonder: What did you eat for lunch on Friday? What did you have? Just yell it out, if you can remember. It sounds like what ever you had it was not all that memorable a meal, and has

faded almost as fast as the after dinner mint. What about your last dinner party that you were invited to or threw yourself—who was there? Do you remember? What was served? What about the last Christmas dinner you had—with whom did you dine? Where did you sit? What was served? Can anyone conjure that image to your mind? What was it like? Who was there? Chances are while the mid-day meal on Thursday is much closer in time and space, the memory of these more distant meals are much clearer to you in detail and accuracy. Sure it is the time and space, and it is not every day we have the special meal. But I am guessing that beyond the tastes, we are brought to the table in our minds as much through the recollection of the people who were there with you as any of the tastes in particular.

It can be argued, reasonably, that this passage from the end of Matthew has nothing to do with Christmas. The infant lowly has grown to be a mature man on the cusp of facing the challenge of his mortal life. We know these words because they are our story of memory, of sitting at table together and recalling body broken and blood shed.. Yet, I would argue that this is indeed a Christmas story insofar as what Jesus is doing here is invoking the power of symbol to take an ordinary meal and make it extraordinary—to remind us of God’s presence—and to do it with those he cares about the most. What makes a meal memorable is not necessarily the cuisine, the chef, or the ambiance, but the company with which the meal is taken. Any of us who have been on a first date with dinner involved can likely recollect in pretty good detail what happened over that first shared sustenance, no matter what happened to the relationship there after. Here Jesus gathers with his friends, the ones who swore up down and sideways that there was no place that he could go that they would not go too. And he says that while that might not be true, that they will share this meal, and it will be a meal of memory for them, offering in taste that which they would not be able to realize in behavior. This is a Christmas story because it is a story of incarnation, of putting flesh on the ways of God.

Sharing a meal is an intrinsically physical and holy act, after all. Think about it; it is the only vital life function of the body that we readily share with those outside the compact of family and committed relationship, at least without rupturing a good number of social expectations along the way. In the tree of survival in a wilderness situation, food is third only to water and shelter in what needs to be secured for survival to be possible. It is over a meal that we share with each other not just pleasant company but necessities of life. With this in mind, the table, where ever it might be, and what ever might be on it (even, I contend, Taco Bell), the table is a holy place, if and only

if we take the time to recognize it for its holiness and its intersection of body, mind and spirit as all are nourished and all are fed in this basic human activity. If we taste the goodness of the Lord within the meal. That is what we are getting at when we say grace—thank you God for showing up with provision, even here; even now.

What is striking to me is what Jesus uses to emblemize the fullness of God with us. This table that he is gather around with the disciples is a holiday table, full of the exotic meats and herbs of that meal; roast lamb, bitter herbs, a roast egg, vegetables; there were far more substantial and exotic fares within reach that Jesus could have adopted to represent the passion he was about to undergo. But he takes the bread and the cup, representational elements within the Seder, yes but the stuff that makes for everyday meals and everyday life, holds them up and with thanks imbues their mundane tastes with extraordinary importance. Were we setting up the ritual for ourselves today, we might go for something a good deal more special and rare; maybe my mom's butterscotch fudge for example; to stand in for the presence of our Lord. But that isn't what Jesus does. Bread and wine, the basic stuff of day to day life; inviting us to remember in the tastes of the ordinary the salvation and embrace of us all. Jesus offers us the everyday in reminding us that the stuff of God resides with us even there.

Communion invites us into the revelation of Christ among us, welcoming us too as disciples, as members of his beloved body to know him, and to incarnate love with him, just as Christ himself comes in love to us. Yet so often, this is message is lost in our own confusion over who is invited, who we are sitting next to, and whether we are worthy or not to come to the table. This essential, simple meal, with such central importance to the way of discipleship has been often lost in the shuffle of confusing theology of what it means to come to the Lord's table, and what sort of meal this actually is. Often, we eat as we do in the rest of life, without savoring, without contemplating, without anticipation and ultimately miss the over riding point of gathering at the table; the encounter with the host that we find there. We are either so familiar with 'this is my body broken for you' that we can lose our connection to its meaning. Other times, we can be bound so tightly in the rigors and traditions of the meal that we can miss the broader themes and possibilities of what it means to gather at the Lord's. Now and again, we need to cleanse the palate; we need to look again at not just that we eat communion, but what it means to take this meal into ourselves, and to know it as the nourishing element of faith that it is: the coming of Christ into our midst, inviting us time and again to taste and see that the Lord is good. What might it be to taste fully

the realities of Christmas together? Might we be able to stomach not just the sweet and seasonal, but also the mundane and bitter as part of God in the world? What would happen if we would contemplate Christ's body and blood intermixed in holy generosity as we eat our way through the season; not to cheapen the table of communion per se, but to widen our notions of what it means to be celebrating the coming of the Christ who comes and dwells among us, savouring life, come what may?.

It is Christ who reveals himself in the meal. It is Christ who welcomes us all to the table, not out of rote memorization, or just eating for eating's sake, but because each one of us is loved enough to be welcome at the table of the Lord. The table, be it sanctified or simple is a place of holy interaction where we are met by the divine spark, be it in the face of the other, the shared essence of life, or in the welcome to the table itself by the inviting host that is revealed in the eating.

Oh dear friends, in this season and every season, taste and see that the Lord is good.