

Eucharist: God-with-Us

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Drawn after the meditation on the Forgiving Father, Luke 15, in four parts. In each picture the sun is yellow with green eyes and red mouth; sky is blue. (1/above) From left to right, 1/3 of the vine is brown, the rest is green with purple grapes. Son is purple. In father's hands, the inheritance is yellow. Father is purple, with a red face. House is brown, grass is green. (2/page 11) From left to right, nearly entire vine is brown; small section on right is green with grapes. Son (on left) is purple with red face; figure on right is red. Contents in goblets is red. (3/page 12) Entire vine is brown; on right edge is tiny green shoot. Pigs are pink. Son is red; object in hands is yellow and brown. (4/page 13) Entire vine is green with purple clusters of grapes. Son is purple. Father is brown with pink arms and face. On ground are fragments of brown vine.

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Introduction

In his effusive love God created humanity. For a time there existed a unique and beautiful relationship between Creator and created; then that relationship was disrupted, and ever since God has had a plan for its full restoration, culminating in the Parousia. Scripture narrates many of the events and peoples associated with this restoration, and offers testimony of how God's plan has been unfolding in historical time, assuring his people of his presence, care, and promise of restoration. Not infrequently God's assurance is manifested in ways perceptible to the human senses, some of which continue today and into the future through the sacraments. In the Sacrament of the Eucharist we encounter Jesus in a most particular way, one both physical and spiritual, in which we can rest fully in his invitation, "Abide in me and I will abide in you." In the Eucharist we take Jesus in, fully, in the flesh, consumed as divinity incarnate.

Eucharist is God's desire to be with us. He created us; he loves his creation and wishes to enjoy a relationship of presence in the fullest sense: physical—like Adam and Eve walking in the garden with God—united with the spiritual. This reality is expressed in Psalm 23 as God the Shepherd and, in the parable of the True Vine in John 15, as God the Vine. In the modern era we make a distinction between the physical and spiritual realms, but we must remember that in the Parousia there is no separation between the physical and spiritual, "God will be all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:28).

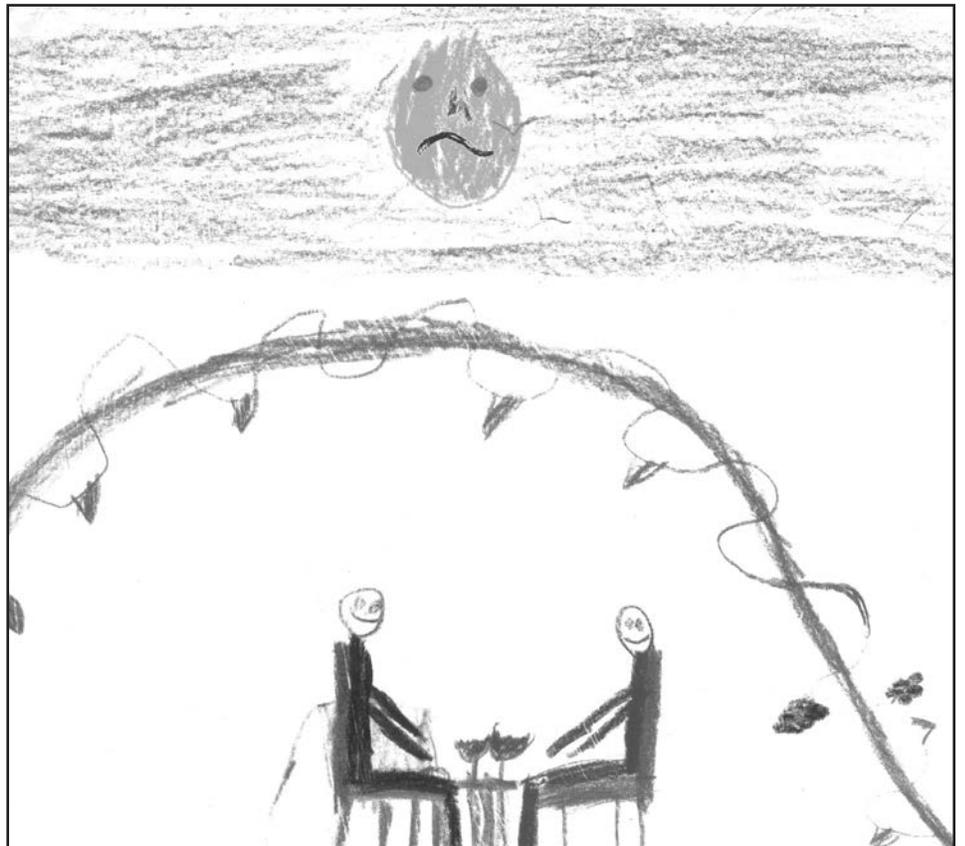
From the third chapter of Genesis through the Book of Revelation, Scripture tells us that God has been in pursuit of his most beloved human creation, consistently offering himself in tangible ways that can be summed up in that most beautiful name: Emmanuel, God-with-us. Matthew's use of the name Emmanuel to express Jesus's nature and origin reminds us that God has always been with us (Matthew 1:23, 28:20). During the centuries since Jesus walked the earth, our participation

in the Sacrament of the Eucharist is a most tangible way we experience Emmanuel, God-with-us. To understand how, we will look at some of the ways God is with humanity in sacred history.

God-with-Us in the Manna

St. John tells us that humanity was loved into being by God: "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). In Genesis chapter 1, God's acts of creation are indicators of his character; repeatedly, we read: "it was good . . . it was good . . . it was good." Throughout history God has manifested himself in forms perceptible to all the human senses:

- as the pillar of cloud and pillar of fire leading Israel in her wilderness wanderings (Exodus 13:21),
- in thunder speaking to Moses (Exodus 19:19),
- in the cloud above the tent of meeting and filling the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34),



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- in the voice that calls to those who have cultivated a listening heart (1 Samuel 3:1–10),
- and even in silence (1 Kings 19:11–13).

After the Hebrews' many years of slavery in Egypt, God woos his people by providing them food and water during their decades of wandering in the desert. Little do the Hebrews realize that God is providing for them both physical and spiritual nourishment (Exodus 16–17)! Much more than mere sustenance, God is offering them the opportunity to know and trust him, a knowing that comes through repeated occasions to grow in reliance upon God, and, ultimately, to trust him for their welfare.¹

The provision of the manna takes on a special role for God's people. After the morning dew lifts, the Hebrew people discover the strange substance on the ground. They do not know what it is, so they call it *mannā*, meaning "What is it?" (Exodus 16:15, 31), implying that it is not within the repertoire of earthly food. Though we do not know the composition of this miraculous food, we know that it was so sustaining that

no other food was necessary for Israel during their time in the desert (Exodus 16:35).² Manna is not a product of human industry but a gift directly from God, given in abundance for all without distinction. While it spoils if stored overnight, it is newly available every day. The very fragility of manna endows Israel with the potential for spiritual prosperity, teaching them to trust that God gives in generosity and abundance. God responds to their needs, and God is tangible and ever present.

Scripture tells how the meaning of the historical event of the manna unfolds in Israel's reflection upon her experience. Although Moses calls manna "the bread from heaven": *lechem* bread *shamayim*/from heaven (Exodus 16:4), to the Hebrew wanderers it seems at first simply a strange form of nourishment. Only much later does the manna become for them the bread of angels, proof of God's reliable presence and care. As Jews return to Jerusalem from the Exile in the fifth century BC, the prophet Ezra recounts the steadfast care of God for his people manifested in his mighty acts, including the bread from heaven and water from the rock (Nehemiah 9:15). The psalmist reminds Israel to seek out the Lord and draw closer in relation-

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ship (Psalm 105). The heavenly bread, the manna, has become the pivotal, substantial, and palpable expression of God's love.

God-with-Us in the Incarnation

Prophecies of the Incarnation pique our curiosity and engender a sense of anticipation. Some prophecies, like that of the Names, are vivid with grand titles such as "Prince of Peace," "Mighty God," "Everlasting Father," and "Wonderful Counselor" (Isaiah 9:6). The prophecies tell us that the Messiah will be greeted with rejoicing and will bring peace to all nations, his sovereignty spanning the ends of the earth (Zechariah 9:10). Knowing as we do today these titles and the anticipated noble reign, it might seem surprising that such a Messiah could be overlooked. Yet he comes to us in such an unexpected form and unlikely setting: an infant, and in a most submissive location: a feeding trough! These circumstances do not bespeak the regal entrance of the King of kings and Lord of lords (Daniel 2:47, 1 Timothy 6:15, Revelation 17:14, 19:16). We ask ourselves, "How can this be?" While this question can't easily be answered, it is a window into God's method, demonstrated

again in the announcement of Jesus's birth to the shepherds, men who are the opposite of noble or royal heritage.

Micah's prophecy tells us that Bethlehem was a small and a comparatively insignificant town in Israel (Micah 5:2). Bethlehem is tied to Ephrath,³ first known as the burial place of Rachel, who died after giving birth to Benjamin (Genesis 35:16–20). Benjamin is the patriarch of the tribe from which Saul, the first king of Israel, descends (1 Samuel 9:1–2 and 1 Samuel 10:1). Bethlehem-Ephrath⁴ establishes a historical precedent in Israel's history of both meagerness and chosenness. Thus, when Samuel tells Saul that God has chosen him to be leader of Israel, Saul's reaction is all the more striking: "I am only a Benjaminite, from the least of the tribes of Israel; and my family is the humblest of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin" (1 Samuel 9:21).

Despite its smallness and apparent insignificance, Bethlehem is where God has prepared both the tribe and the lineage into which Jesus is born. And there is another striking word association: the Hebrew name for Jesus's city of infancy is



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Beit-lechem, literally the “house of bread.” Here we may arrest ourselves; we may sit and wonder. There are reasonable historical explanations for Mary’s and Joseph’s travel to Bethlehem, yet has there already been an announcement as to the nature of this infant simply by his being in that town? God himself, the Bread of Life, is incarnated for humanity in the house of bread, this bread that will find its fullest expression at a very special feast in the future. In a beautiful sense, the Incarnation—God’s substance coming into existence in the world—is like an overture to the Eucharist. Like the Incarnation, Eucharist breaks through the boundaries of historical time, giving us the opportunity for physical and spiritual intimacy with God.

God-with-Us in the Eucharist

Up to and including our own day, the saving actions of God described in Exodus have lived continuously in the Passover festival of the Jewish people. At the center of festivities is the Passover meal in which each Jew, through retelling the story, relives how the suffering of the Hebrew people is answered by God’s rescue, generosity, and care. More than a thousand years after the first Passover and Exodus, Jesus celebrates the traditional Passover with the customary food, but in an entirely new light. Jesus offers the disciples—and us—an invitation to unite with him in a tangible manner, the roots of which stretch far back into history: “Jesus took a loaf of bread . . . and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body.’ Then he took a cup . . . saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant’” (Matthew 26:26–28).

While the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians and the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke give us the words of Jesus at the Passover meal, the Gospel of John gives us the means to understand these words (1 Corinthians 11:23–25, Matthew 26:26–28, Mark 14:22–24, Luke 22:19–20, John 6:32–40). It is no coincidence that Jesus’s announcement comes on the verge of the festival memorializing God’s saving action and his people’s freedom (John 6:4). In the context of the approaching Passover God saves and frees once more, this time through Jesus, who invites us to live with him and the Father for eternity.

Some time before the Passover, Jesus is asked by the crowd following him to give a sign, to perform a miraculous work the same way that the Israelites “ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat’”

(John 6:31). Jesus replies with a consummate announcement, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever” (John 6:51). Jesus’s words imply a greater unfolding of the Exodus events, specifically of the manna, which now finds its fullest expression as a physical and spiritual sustenance given towards intimacy with God, and eternal life:

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. . . . This is the bread that came down from heaven . . . the one who eats this bread will live forever. (John 6:56, 58)

Each time we participate in the Eucharistic meal we are nourished by the heavenly bread whose substance is Jesus.

And so even the smallest detail is given great attentiveness by God in his plan to beckon us into ever-closer relationship with him, culminating in the intermingling of Creator and created. In all the actions of God in the life of his human creation we see his love and fidelity to our covenantal relationship manifested in a work of cooperation between God and us. We see this in the first Passover, we see it again in a new way in the Last Supper, and it continues in the celebration of the Eucharist, which will remain in place until the full banquet in the Parousia. In his book *Preparing Yourself for Mass*, Romano Guardini reminds us: “At the Last Supper we saw how the Lord established institution upon institution: the memorial of his saving love and its covenant between God and the new holy people upon the memorial of the liberation from Egypt under the old covenant, now completed. . . . Now the new, valid, commemorative feast is there to remain ‘until the Lord returns’ at the end of time.”⁵

God-with-Us to the End of Time

The idea of the end of time can spark a sense of dread. To read literally the events of the end times as described in the Book of Revelation, without the proper context of the history of God’s Kingdom, can lead to gross misinterpretation of what is actually a vibrant book of hope that points to a time of inestimable glory and joy.⁶ In reality, this reference to the end of time refers to a new beginning, the restoration of the relationship between Creator and created. Our beautiful world is disfigured by the effects of sin. The end of time is simply the end of human history as we know it, an end to the effects of fallen-ness in our

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world. This fallen-ness that finds expression in all aspects of creation, such as the ground that is not guaranteed to produce (Genesis 3:17b–18a), the enmity between created beings (Isaiah 11:6–8, 65:25), and pain and suffering (Genesis 3:16–17; Isaiah 35:5–6, 61:1), will be restored at the end of time. The Parousia marks the beginning of the new time when all of creation will flourish in unbridled joy, as the Book of Revelation unambiguously declares: “I saw a new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21:1). In addition, the promises of Jesus in the parable of the Good Shepherd, the True Vine, and his announcements of the Light and Bread of Life, invite us to follow him into this new, abundant life where we will unite in the fullest way with our Creator (See John 10:10b, 15:11, 8:12, 6:54–58; and Revelation 21:3–4).

The prophets gave the people of Israel hope through particularly vivid indications of the coming new age. Isaiah describes a banquet of abundance, a banquet for all:

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines . . . and the LORD God will wipe away the tears from all faces. . . . It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation. (Isaiah 25:6–9)

A banquet, especially a wedding feast, expresses in a particular way the joy of union, whether the union of humans on earth, or the reunion of Creator and human. Scripture offers several glimpses of the Kingdom of God through the parables of marriage and its celebratory feast, such as in the Kingdom of God and the bridesmaids (Matthew 25:1), the marriage feast for the king’s son (Matthew 22:2), and the wedding feast at Cana, at which Jesus performed a miracle of abundance (John 2:1–11). Similarly, the Book of Revelation describes the fullness of relationship with God using the image of a wedding banquet:

Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and his bride has made herself ready. . . . Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb. (Revelation 19:7–9)

In the Eucharist we already participate in the heavenly banquet which we will enjoy to the full in the Parousia. Praying the Sanctus, we are part of the heavenly feast that will continue until the Parousia, when Creator and all his creation will live together in infinite fullness, and we “shall dwell

in the house of the LORD” forever (Psalm 23:6). When we sing, “Holy Holy Holy Lord of hosts, heaven and earth are full of your glory,”⁷ we are joining the heavenly choirs making the same proclamation, as prophesied by Isaiah (Isaiah 6:3, Revelation 4:8). Liturgy is a unique moment in which time has collapsed or, rather, the past, present, and future are in unison. The veil between heaven and earth are torn open when, in the Eucharistic prayer, the priest prays on behalf of the assembly:

In humble prayer we ask you, almighty God: command that these gifts be borne by the hands of your holy Angel to your altar on high . . . so that all of us, who through this participation at the altar receive the most holy Body and Blood of your Son, may be filled with every grace and heavenly blessing.⁸

Each time we participate in the Eucharistic meal we stand with the communion of saints and angels, nourished by the heavenly bread whose substance is Jesus. *Manna*, “What is it?”, is answered by Jesus.

We feast.

¹ Jesus too encouraged the same, “do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear” (Luke 12:22; see also Matthew 6:25).

² To be sure, Israel craved other foods, as in the episode of the quail meat (Numbers 11:4).

³ Ephrath is also called Ephrathah or Ephratah.

⁴ In the Book of Ruth, Ephrathah/Bethlehem is mentioned in the blessing given to the Israelite Boaz who has just promised to wed the non-Israelite Ruth, that the “Lord make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you produce children in Ephrathah and bestow a name in Bethlehem” (Ruth 4:11).

⁵ Romano Guardini, *Preparing Yourself for Mass* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1997), 143.

⁶ The vivid catastrophes described in the Book of Revelation tell of the *conquering* of sin and evil.

⁷ Rev. James Socias, *The Daily Roman Missal*, 3rd ed. (Woodridge, Illinois: Midwest Theological Forum, International Committee on English in the Liturgy, Inc., 2010), 767. The Sanctus is also found in the *Book of Common Prayer* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1979), “Holy Communion Rite II,” 362.

⁸ Eucharistic Prayer I—Rev. James Socias, *The Daily Roman Missal, Third Edition* (Woodridge, Illinois: Midwest Theological Forum, International Committee on English in the Liturgy, Inc., 2010), 779.