



Central Peninsula Church

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The Communion Story

New Year's Eve

Did you have a good Christmas? I did too. We spent Christmas with my family in the Sacramento area. It was my son's first Christmas and so we had a great time showing him off to the rest of the family and, for the first time in my life, I got to unwrap a large Christmas present that turned out to be a jumbo pack of 216 diapers. I don't know why diapers come in packs of 216, but even though this gift wasn't on my list, I was actually pretty excited to receive these free diapers. I'm finding that becoming a dad really changes what you get excited about!

The other highlight of my Christmas day came when my dad asked me to spend a few hours helping him sweep a dirty parking lot. My dad owns an alarm company in the Sacramento area and stretched out behind his warehouse is this very large, football-field-size, company parking lot. And apparently my dad thought that since his oldest son was in town it would be a great idea for the two of us to spend Christmas afternoon together cleaning up this parking lot.

As my dad and I swept load after load of litter and leaves I was reminded that the only reason that parking lot exists is because of a New Year's resolution my dad made 25 years ago. Twenty-five years ago, when I was just three years old, in the month of December, our home was robbed. While we were out at a movie, thieves broke into our home and stole all of our valuables. According to my parents, the thieves even stole my blue piggy bank and a pumpkin pie from our refrigerator. My dad, who was working as a dispatcher for a trucking company, working hard to provide for his family, was just devastated and angry. So he made a New Year's resolution to learn how to install alarm systems and to start up his own alarm company. Because of that 25-year-old New Year's resolution, I spent my Christmas afternoon sweeping the parking lot of a company that's helped protect thousands of homes and families from being burglarized.

New Year's resolutions can make a big difference. I'm curious, how many of you have made a New Year's resolution for 2007? Last year the top three New Year's resolutions in America were: spend more time with family, lose weight, and get out of debt. Those are good resolutions. Maybe some of you have made similar resolutions for 2007.

What I want to do today, on New Year's Eve, is invite you to make a unique resolution for 2007. I believe that this is one of the most important resolutions you could ever make because this resolution addresses our deepest need and it puts all of our other resolutions into proper perspective. This resolution has to do with communion—which we get to celebrate together when I'm done talking. But before I can tell you about this resolution, I first need to tell you a story.

The Bible is a big book that tells a single story. From Genesis to Revelation, though these two bookends of the Bible were written about 1,500 years apart from each other, the Bible tells one unfolding story about God and his plan to rescue and redeem broken people. And there are a lot of angles from which we can view this big story. There are hundreds of themes that we can trace through this story. What we're going to do today is trace the theme of communion through the Bible.

And you need to know that as I use the word "communion" I have two overlapping definitions in mind. I mean both *communion capital C*: the overall relationship between God and man. To be "in communion" with someone is to be in relationship with someone, so by communion capital C I'm referring to the general relationship between God and man. That's the first definition. Overlapping with this definition is *communion lowercase c*: the event or sacrament of communion in which we Christians celebrate the work of Jesus. So, when I say the word "communion" this morning, I want both of these definitions in our minds.

This is a different kind of sermon today and so I want to ask you to listen differently. Today we're beginning in Genesis and ending in Revelation, looking at the major episodes in the communion story. We're going to move through these pretty quickly. So let me ask you to not get caught up in the details of this story. Don't worry about the details or about trying to remember the little titles I've given to the chapters of this story. What I want you to do is to simply enjoy the story. And if through this message some of you come to a little bit better understanding of how the whole Bible fits together and if some of you make a New Year's resolution that helps you to better see the Savior in communion, then I'll have done my job today.

I. Communion Promised: Genesis 3:15

The Bible begins, the communion story begins, with God and man in communion, in close relationship, in the garden of Eden. God created man to be in communion with him. Yet only three chapters into the story man breaks communion with God. Adam and Eve eat from the forbidden tree, believing the lie that their lives would be better if they broke communion with God and lived autonomously from him. Right in the beginning of the story we have rebellion and tragedy. And our world has never been the same since. Ever since that original breaking of communion in the garden, we humans have been a broken people, who've been living with this communion-shaped, God-shaped hole in our hearts that we run around trying to fill with all sorts of false communions and relationships and addictions.

Man's greatest need is to fix this broken communion with God. Just look around our Peninsula. We have big problems on this Peninsula like abuse, poverty, disease, divorce, sexual perversion, loneliness, violence, addiction, traffic, the 49ers' record, you name it. The ultimate cause of these problems is that communion with God has been broken. Genesis 3 provides the only satisfactory explanation for what's wrong with our world and our hearts. If things are really going to get better on the Peninsula and in our lives, the communion problem must be fixed. And the good news is that a long time ago God himself took action to fix the communion that we broke. When Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, what did God do? He responded with grace!

Turn to Genesis 3:15, to the first chapter in our story, a chapter that I'm calling "Communion Promised."

In Genesis 3:14 God curses the serpent, God curses Satan, for tempting Adam and Eve to sin. Then, here in verse 15, God continues his curse on the serpent and he extends a promise to man. This verse is commonly referred to as the "proto-evangel," the "first gospel." And, if you get this verse you're way ahead of the game in understanding the message of the whole Bible. **"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel"** (Gen. 3:15).

This is good news. See, Adam and Eve had broken communion with God and sought communion with Satan. Long before, God had graciously warned Adam that if he broke communion by eating from the forbidden tree he would die. Yet here, God intervenes between Adam and death. Right from the beginning of the story we see that God is a God of grace. God

intervenes by making a promise that from Eve will come an offspring who will crush the serpent and restore communion between God and man. The promise is that God will provide a descendant who *will do* what Adam did *not do*. God had commanded Adam to guard the garden. Adam failed. But here God promises that through the woman will come one who *will* guard the garden, who will *not* give in to the serpent, but instead keep communion with God and battle the serpent. The rest of the Bible can be read as the search for the serpent crusher, the search for the one who will crush Satan and restore communion between God and man.

After receiving this promise Eve goes on to have children, grandchildren, great grandchildren, and on and on it goes with Cain, Seth, Noah, and so on. None of these offspring keep communion with God. Every single one of them follows in the footsteps of Adam and Eve, living a life East of Eden. Yet many years later one of these descendants receives further promises from God. A man named Abraham receives a special offspring, a son, and with this, the plot thickens in the communion story.

II. Communion Provided: Genesis 22

Let's turn to Genesis 22 where we have Communion Provided. **"After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here am I.' He said, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you'"** (Gen. 22:1-2).

If we had read the chapters leading up to these two verses we would've learned about God's big promise to give Abraham offspring, to give Abraham a son who would play a significant role in carrying out God's communion-restoring plan, the plan that stretches all the way back to the promise of Genesis 3:15. But here we have a great moment of suspense as God now calls for the death of Abraham's special firstborn son. In the ancient world a family's hopes all hung on the firstborn son. Yet God orders Abraham to sacrifice this son of hope. Why?

The text tells us that God did this to test Abraham. Yet when you look at the larger story we see that in this chapter, what God is also doing is introducing us to how it is that sinful people can commune with a holy, sinless God. See, like every one of us in this room, Abraham and Isaac were sinners. They were just like Adam and Eve; both father and son had broken communion with God and God had every right to demand their life. Abraham

knows this, yet he also knows that long ago God made a promise to keep communion with his people. And Abraham holds on to this promise as he leads his beloved son up the mountain of sacrifice.

“And Isaac said to his father Abraham, ‘My father!’ And he said, ‘Here am I, my son.’ He said, ‘Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?’ Abraham said, ‘God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.’ So they went both of them together. When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, ‘Abraham, Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here am I.’ He said, ‘Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.’ And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son” (Gen. 22:7-13).

This is the first mention in the Bible of substitutionally sacrifice. Here we have the first revelation that communion between God and man is achieved through substitution. Sinful Isaac could go on living in communion with his father and with God because a lamb was substituted in his stead, in-stead of him. God provided a lamb to take the place of Isaac.

This theme of communion by substitution is central to the storyline of the Bible. Later in this story we’ll learn of a greater substitute. We’ll encounter a lamb who wasn’t caught in a thicket of thorns, but instead wore a crown of thorns. Later we’ll learn of a Father who marched his one and only son up a different mountain of sacrifice, only this Father doesn’t hold back the knife.

III. Communion Preserved: Exodus 12

So, young Isaac is not sacrificed. He grows up to have children of his own. His son Jacob (who also goes by the name Israel) goes on to have 12 sons, 12 sons who eventually become the 12 tribes of Israel. Through a dramatic series of events, Jacob and his family relocate to the land of Egypt. Their numbers multiply. For a few hundred years the Israelites are well treated by the Egyptians. But eventually the Egyptians make the Israelites into slaves. For the Israelites, communion with God feels distant and broken. Eventually God raises up a man named Moses to battle the Egyptian Pharaoh and rescue the people of Israel. Through a series of nine

devastating plagues, Pharaoh remains unphased and refuses to release God’s people. And it’s at this point in the story that God institutes a tenth plague which is simultaneously a judgment on the Egyptians *as well* as a new beginning and a very special meal for the Israelites.

This part of the story also has everything to do with lambs, sons, and substitution. It has everything to do with the meal we will soon eat. Exodus 12, Communion Preserved.

“Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month every man shall take a lamb according to their fathers’ houses, a lamb for a household.... Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male a year old. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats, and you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs at twilight. Then they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it.... In this manner you shall eat it: with your belt fastened, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. And you shall eat it in haste. It is the LORD’s Passover. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. The blood shall be a sign for you, on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt” (Ex. 12:3, 5–7, 11–13).

Years ago God preserved communion with his people by substituting the life of unblemished lambs for the life of blemished, firstborn sons. Through the blood of lambs, God passed over and preserved the blood of his people. God didn’t give his people what they deserved. He gave them grace.

Today, the Passover meal is still celebrated by Jews. We Christians celebrate this meal too, but we do so differently. Later in the story we’ll gain a better understanding of this meal as we learn of a firstborn son who *was not* passed over, of an unblemished lamb whose blood was smeared on a different kind of post.

IV. Communion Portrayed: Leviticus 16

Shortly after this first Passover, while the Israelites are camped in the wilderness, God institutes for his people a ceremony known as The

Day of Atonement, or, in Hebrew: Yom Kippur. This day was, and still is, the highpoint of the Jewish calendar.

Here in Leviticus 16 we have Communion Portrayed. Here we learn that once a year, God's high priest maintained communion between God and his people through a series of sacrifices and confession. The first part of the ceremony took place in the Holy of Holies, where only the high priest and God were involved. But the climax of this ceremony took place in front of all the people. We pick up the story here.

“Then he shall take the two goats and set them before the LORD at the entrance of the tent of meeting. And Aaron shall cast lots over the two goats, one lot for the LORD and the other lot for Azazel (scapegoat). And Aaron shall present the goat on which the lot fell for the LORD and use it as a sin offering, but the goat on which the lot fell for Azazel (scapegoat) shall be presented alive before the LORD to make atonement over it, that it may be sent away into the wilderness to Azazel (scapegoat)... And Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins. And he shall put them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness. The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area, and he shall let the goat go free in the wilderness” (Lev. 16:7–10, 21–22).

Imagine what it would've been like to witness this ceremony! Once a year the high priest selects a scapegoat, he lays both his hands on the head of this living goat, and he confesses all of the people's sins, all of the ways in which the people have broken communion with God, over the head of this goat. And then this sin-soaked scapegoat is sent out of the camp, out into the wilderness, never to be seen again. As the people of Israel watched the goat disappear over the horizon, they knew that God would continue to commune with them because a scapegoat symbolically bore their sins.

Would any of you like a scapegoat who'd take the blame for your sin? Soon we come to the ultimate scapegoat.

V. Communion Prophesied: Isaiah 52 & 53

But first, about 700 years after this first Day of Atonement, our story takes on a new twist. It's now about the year 700 BC and Israel is soon to be conquered and led into exile by the Assyrians. God's people continue to follow in the footsteps of Adam. The great promise of Genesis 3:15, the promise of the serpent crusher who will restore communion between God and man seems far off. Though for many years now communion with God has been maintained through the sacrifice and substitution of

lambs and goats, Genesis 3:15 spoke not of lambs and goats but of a person.

Here in Isaiah 52 and 53 we have Communion Prophesied and, for the first time, we learn not of a lamb, but of a person who will fulfill the role of a sacrificial animal.

“Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted.... All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth” (Isa. 52:13; 53:6–7).

Here, for the first time, it is prophesied that one person will bear, like a slaughtered lamb, the penalty for broken communion. The next chapter of our story introduces us to this person.

VI. Communion Pronounced: John 1:29

Another 700 years pass. God's people go into exile. Eventually they're released from exile. Yet, even released from exile all these years later, the people of God are still under foreign occupation and still lost in their sin. The Lamb prophesied in Isaiah has not yet come. But right around the year 30 AD, a man named John makes a startling pronouncement.

Here we have, in John chapter 1, Communion Pronounced. While John the Baptist baptizes ordinary people in the Jordan River, suddenly an un-ordinary person appears and John says this about him, **“The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’”** (John 1:29).

John declares that Jesus, the Jew from Nazareth, is the one that Isaiah spoke about. Jesus is the lamb that is to be led to the slaughter.

VII. Communion Prepared: Matthew 26

A few years later, the Lamb of God holds a special meal with his disciples. This is not a new meal for Jesus and his disciples. This is the Passover meal (which we looked at earlier) and since birth these men had celebrated this meal with their families during the first month of each new year. This meal was familiar territory for Jesus and the disciples: you sat in reclined position, you ate from a common dish of bread and lamb, you drank from four different cups of wine, and you retold the story of Passover and Exodus.

But during this particular Passover meal,

Jesus speaks one new word that changes everything. We're in Matthew 26. This is Communion Prepared.

“Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, ‘Where will you have us prepare for you to eat the Passover?’ He said, ‘Go into the city to a certain man and say to him, “The Teacher says, My time is at hand. I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples”.... Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body.’ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’” (Matt. 26:17–18, 26–28).

What's entirely new about this Passover meal is the word “my.” This wasn't part of the traditional Passover liturgy. What Jesus is doing here is radical. What he's saying is that the Passover is really all about him. He's saying that the Passover has always pointed to him—to his body that is to be broken like bread, to his blood that is to be poured out like wine. Jesus is saying that it is he who enables God to pass over sin and commune with his people.

VIII. Communion Purchased: Matthew 27

Shortly after this Passover meal Jesus leads his disciples to a garden, to the garden of Gethsemane. Many years earlier Adam broke communion with God in the garden of Eden. But in the garden of Gethsemane Jesus obeys, he keeps communion with God, and that gets him betrayed, arrested, beaten, and put on trial before the Roman governor.

Here in Matthew 27 we have Communion Purchased. Here Jesus purchases what he'd proclaimed in the meal the night before. He purchases the ancient promise of Genesis 3:15.

“Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the crowd any one prisoner whom they wanted. And they had then a notorious prisoner called Barabbas. So when they had gathered, Pilate said to them, ‘Whom do you want me to release for you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?... The governor again said to them, ‘Which of the two do you want me to release for you?’ And they said, ‘Barabbas.’ Pilate said to them, ‘Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?’ They all said, ‘Let him be crucified!’ And he said, ‘Why, what evil has he done?’ But they shouted all the more, ‘Let him be crucified!’... Then he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus,

delivered him to be crucified” (Matt. 27:15–17, 21–23, 26).

Jesus the innocent one, the unblemished lamb, dies in the place of the guilty one. Instead of sinful Barabbas, sinless Jesus undergoes the most shameful and painful of all first century deaths: crucifixion. And on the shameful cross, what did the Son of God experience? He experienced broken communion with God. Remember Jesus's famous last words? “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” That's the only place in the Gospels where Jesus doesn't call God “Father.” As Jesus our substitute bore our sins on the cross, he lost communion with his Father. On the cross Jesus couldn't cry “Father” because he was purchasing the right for us to call God “Father.”

IX. Communion Preached: 1 Corinthians 11

Twenty years later the apostle Paul wrote a letter to a church that needed to re-learn what the communion meal was all about. And this ties the whole story together. In 1 Corinthians 11 we have Communion Preached.

“For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, ‘This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me’” (1 Cor. 11:23-25).

It's repeated twice: “do this in remembrance of me.” Paul says that the whole focus of the communion meal is to be on Jesus. Now, this gets at the resolution I have for us.

If you're like me, you often approach communion as though it's mainly about dwelling on your own sin and failures. But, as we've seen this morning, the communion story isn't mainly about us, it's about our Savior. And the purpose of the communion meal *isn't* to examine our sin (though that's involved), *it's* to examine our Savior. According to this text, the focus of what we're going to do here in a minute *isn't* to remember our imperfect behavior and performance, *it's* to remember our Savior's behavior and performance.

See, Jesus is the one who's fulfilled the promise of Genesis 3:15, crushing the serpent and restoring our communion with God. Jesus is the beloved son who, unlike Isaac, was in fact sacrificed upon a mountain. Jesus is our true Passover Lamb whose blood was smeared, not on a doorpost, but on

a cross. Jesus is the true scapegoat over whose head we may confess our sins, trusting that he's removed them to a forgotten wilderness.

X. Communion Perfected: Revelation 21 & 22

And in the book of Revelation we learn that there's still more to this Savior and more to this story. Our Savior has also ensured that one day we will enjoy Communion Perfected.

At the very end of our Bibles we get a glimpse of this. The Bible begins in Eden. But the Bible comes to an end and the communion story comes to its ending, or better yet, its true beginning, in a new heaven and new earth that's even better than Eden. Here the Father and the Lamb will dwell in perfect communion, *not* just with two people in a small garden, but with multitudes of people in a vast garden-like city.

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away'... Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him" (Rev. 21:1–4; 22:1–3).

CONCLUSION

The communion story is not over. The story continues and it only gets better. And the communion meal is our Savior's gift to us. Through this meal we enter afresh into this great story and remember both what our Savior has done and what he will do.

You and I make New Year's resolutions because something is broken and needs fixing, whether that's spending more time with the family, losing weight, getting out of debt, starting an alarm company, or whatever. Long ago God saw that our relationship with him was broken and needed fixing. This problem was not his fault. It's our fault. Yet long before any of us ever

made any kind of a resolution, God made a resolution, God began a story, to send his one and only son to be our substitute on the cross and restore us to communion with the Father.

So in response I invite you, all of you who confess Jesus as your Savior, to make a simple yet powerful New Year's resolution: when you celebrate communion, do it in remembrance of him. As you hold the cracker and handle the juice, examine your Savior, not yourself. As you chew and as you sip, recall this story, recall your Savior who's alive, who's here with us right now, in this meal—the communion meal, the meal that our world needs most.