

THE FIERY FURNACE
DANIEL 3: 19-25
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As we celebrate this time of Holy Communion, it is a right and proper thing to reflect on the nature and purpose of this sacrament. We celebrate this sacrament, here at Trenton United Methodist and at most Methodist churches, on the first Sunday of the month and other special occasions.

Growing up as a Baptist, we celebrated Holy Communion once a quarter. Some denominations celebrate this sacrament weekly.

When we use the word “sacrament” just what do we mean? The word sacrament comes from the Latin “sacramentum,” which means “sign of the sacred.” A sacrament is an occasion for experiencing God’s saving presence.

We are familiar with three terms related to this sacrament.

1. Holy Communion: this stresses the union it brings us with God and with other Christians.
2. The Lord’s Supper: this recalls that meal at which Christ instituted this sacrament.
3. The Eucharist: this is from the Greek and means “thanksgiving” for in this sacrament we give thanks for all that God does for us in our savior Jesus Christ.

In most protestant churches, there are two sacraments, baptism and communion. In the Catholic Church, there are seven: baptism; Eucharist (Holy Communion); reconciliation (or penance); confirmation; marriage; Holy Orders (Priesthood); anointing the sick. These have beautiful richness and truth and symbolism and can certainly help all of us in our spiritual walk.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church in the 1700’s, was greatly influenced by the Moravian Church.

The Moravian Church was started by, in the early 1700’s, in Germany by a group of religious exiles seeking religious freedom. The Moravian Church places great emphasis on Christian unity, personal piety, missions, and music.

It is interesting to note that so many hymns in the Methodist hymnal were written by John Wesley’s brother, Charles.

The Moravian motto is “Our Lamb has conquered, let us follow Him.”

The missional emphasis of the Moravians led them to the new world, where one of the mission areas was the state of Georgia, our neighbor to the north. During the 1730’s, John Wesley decided to go to Georgia on a mission trip. Overall, the trip, as understood by Wesley’s goal, was a failure. However, it is here that Wesley first met the Moravians and we can see their influence in the development of Wesley and the Methodist Church.

Albert Outler, a Methodist scholar and historian, in his book “John Wesley” writes that the Moravians “who taught him, by example and precept, that faith should be fearless and that piety can be buoyant.”

Or, as we sing in the children’s song, “I’ve got that joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart!”

With this Moravian heritage, I researched their understanding of Holy Communion. These are some of the highlights:

1. God makes use of the physical elements, bread and wine, so that with prayer and faith they become a means of experiencing God's grace in a special way.
2. We are obeying Christ's command, given at the last supper "do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19 and 1 Cor 11: 24 -25). This is a special sort of remembrance for as we share the sacrament, it becomes for us the living sign of Christ's sacrifice upon the cross.

We pray for the Holy Spirit to make this sacrament of our crucified and risen savior effective and real for us so that we may receive renewed assurance of the forgiveness of our sin and be strengthened to live new lives in Christ for witness and service to the world.

3. We give thanks God for all that he has done in creating and sustaining us – most of all, for redeeming us from sin, for eternal life, in Christ Jesus.
4. The emphasis is on the grace and work of God for us in the life, death and resurrection of Christ, made present and active through the Holy Spirit. Everything is to be done with simplicity and dignity.

This is why we ministers wear a plain white robe while presiding at this sacrament. It is not badge of rank or privilege, but rather a symbolic blanking out of the minister's individual personality, emphasizing that it is Christ who presides at this sacrament, consecrates the elements, and gives grace as these elements are distributed.

5. An open table: all who would call upon Jesus Christ for help, for forgiveness, for healing, for life are welcomed and encouraged to receive this sacrament. This emphasizes the unity of Christian church.

I hold in my hand a fishing rod and reel. Many of you have had experience with this wonderful invention. But, have you ever experienced, while fishing, a backlash. A backlash is when you make a cast and the result is that the line backs up into a terrible mess to the degree that the only way out is to cut the line and start over.

Has your life ever seemed like this? Sometimes we really mess up. This is called sin. Sometimes circumstances come at us which are beyond our control and we are overwhelmed. In each case, God approaches us. He comes into our lives, knocking at the door of our hearts. What is impossible for man is possible for God. When life overwhelms us, the living Christ walks on water to our sinking boats.

Well, it seems we have come a long way from Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. However, as we look more closely at the scripture, we are reminded of the fourth person seen in the fiery furnace.

Many people, including me, believe this is what is called a theophany: an appearance of Christ in the Old Testament.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego...thrown into the fiery furnace because of their faithfulness to God. And God was there to protect them.

There is an early church father, Polycarp, who lived in Smyrna. He lived from 69 A.D. to 155 A.D. he, like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, was ordered to swear allegiance to one other than God. Like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, he refused. With each challenge, Polycarp's reply became even stronger. Finally, he was told "I'll have you destroyed by fire, unless you change your attitude." He answered, "The fire you threaten with burns for a time and is soon extinguished: there is another fire you know nothing about – the fire of the

judgment to come and of eternal punishment, the fire reserved for the ungodly. But why do you hesitate? Do what you want?"

And so, Polycarp, too, was thrown, if you would, into a fiery furnace. Christ was with him, just as he was with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

When the fire was ready, Polycarp prayed,

“O Father of Thy beloved and blessed Son, Jesus Christ, through whom we have come to know thee, the God of angels and powers and all creation, and of the whole family of the righteous who live in thy presence; I bless thee for counting me worthy of this day and hour, that in the number of thy martyrs I may partake of Christ’s cup, to the resurrection of both soul and body in the imperishability that is the gift of the Holy Spirit...”

When he offered up the amen, the men in charge lit the fire, the fire was all consuming and Christ walked Polycarp into the promised land, into the city where the river of the water of life, flows from the throne of God.

And, so it is with us, on the day of Holy Communion. With so great a cloud of witnesses, we are called to walk with Christ. What is your answer?