

PENTECOST 20 – OCTOBER 6, 2024
EXODUS 12:1-13; 13:1-8
THE PROMISE OF PASSOVER

The Book of Exodus is a mixture of very early oral material which has come from different traditions and has been consolidated into one book. The events are pivotal to the Jewish faith and just as we have four gospels telling us about Jesus, so the Jews have different memories of the same events. In Exodus the traditions are all mixed in the same book which at times makes for a difficult reading, especially trying to follow the time line.

Different communities like those of the New Testament had different memories and emphases which had become important to them. So, when the Scriptures were committed to writing, there was a desire to incorporate the diverse memories of people, and their experience of God within their lives.

As the book of Exodus begins, we find things are not so great for the descendants of Joseph and his brothers. A new pharaoh rules the land and he “did not know Joseph”. Between the time of Joseph and the current period, the Hebrews grew in size from a handful of people to a vast group within Egypt. The new Pharaoh did not have the same generous attitude as the first Pharaoh. He feared the Hebrews because of their large numbers. He put them to work doing hard labour and long hours on his building projects, so they would be too tired to procreate. A people who were once guests were now slaves.

Enter Moses. He was saved from a terror campaign initiated by the Pharaoh which killed every Hebrew male child. Ironically, Moses grows up in the Pharaoh’s household, taken care of by Pharaoh’s daughter. God calls Moses to lead his people out of Egypt.

Pharaoh refuses to let the people leave and it becomes a match between Pharaoh and God. A series of plagues strike the Egyptians until a final plague kills all the firstborn Egyptians, and Pharaoh lets the Hebrews go. But then Pharaoh’s heart was hardened and he sent the army after the Hebrews. Consequently, the army drowned in the Red Sea. Many are troubled by the divine violence at the centre of the Exodus story. Pharaoh is violent in his oppression, but why does God have to respond with violence? This is not an exclusively modern concern. The slaughter of the firstborn and drowning of the Egyptians

troubled early readers as well.

A passage in the Talmud recounts God rebuking the angels in heaven because they wanted to sing hymns of praise while the Egyptians, who are also God's creatures, perish in the sea. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks observes that we may rejoice in the triumph of justice and the defeat of evil in the world, while also identifying with the suffering of the victims, much like what is going on in the Middle East. Egypt is often perceived as the quintessential enemy in the Hebrew Bible. Most famously, God delivers Israel from the enslaving power of Egypt in the Exodus. This is where the story begins for us today.

The editor of Exodus stops his narrative right in its tracks and announces that it is time to celebrate the story in regularized ritual. The details are important, because they point us to the story in ways that the story itself cannot do. Passover is to be performed in the month of - Abib - the time when YHWH brought Israel from the land of Egypt, out of the house of their slavery. The appropriate day is the tenth of Abib. It may seem a little odd to be looking at the Passover story at this time.

But, it is important to note how the ethics, widely pervasive in the rest of the Old Testament are also found here. This is the main focus of the Passover meal. If a family cannot afford to provide a lamb for the Passover, it is the responsibility of a better-off neighbouring family to share what they have. The idea that "households join together", and that the lamb shall be divided proportionally to the number of persons present, reflects the deep biblical conviction that the good of the community as a whole must and should be intentionally cultivated. The emphasis is on the responsibilities of members to the community's welfare, not on the rights of particular individuals.

What a great way to ensure that all have enough and no one has more than their share. At the very heart of Passover is the desire to include all in the ritual and to make certain that all have enough, but none have too much. The people are to eat what they can that night and not have any leftovers. Egypt's economy is based on hierarchical oppression in which an abundance of food is produced on the backs of the poor but is enjoyed almost exclusively by the very rich. By contrast the economy of the wilderness, inaugurated at the Exodus, teaches Israel to trust in God as deliverer and provider of food. They must leave

hoarding and scarcity behind, both as a practice and as a mentality. They are to embrace faith in this God who delivers them.

Immediately, one can see that this sort of sharing is intended to be a model for the larger society, a society that too often presents some with far more than they need and many with far less. Our 21st-century society is like that, unfortunately and to our shame. Two billion of our fellow humans attempt to live on perhaps two dollars or less per day, while the eighty-five richest human beings on the earth control more resources than all of those two billion! Passover in its heart is a call to equality.

The lamb, whether sheep or goat, is to be without blemish, reflecting the pure life that all who participate are called to live. The ritual slaughter of the lamb is delayed until the fourteenth day of the month and is to be done at twilight, as a memory of the nighttime escape of Israel from Egypt. From the blood of the lamb, each celebrant is to smear blood on the two doorposts and the lintel of the house where the ritual is being celebrated. Of course, this part of the ritual is clearly a much later adaptation, since doorposts and lintels are hardly available in the desert! In a modern Jewish house, one still finds a "mezuzah" (Hebrew for "doorpost"), an artistic brass plate, usually containing words from Deuteronomy, as a substitution for the blood of the sacrifice.

God is telling the people of Israel to eat on the run, because God was going to force Pharaoh's hand. Just as Pharaoh sought to destroy the Israelites by killing the young boys, a spirit would come for the firstborn of Egypt. The preparation of the meal was incredibly specific. They eat bitter herbs as a reminder of their suffering. They use flatbread or bread without yeast because they had to eat in a hurry. The lamb was not to be eaten raw or boiled. Why did it matter if the meat was boiled? Because the waters of Egypt were the place where the Hebrew male infants were drowned at the Pharaoh's command. The water brought death and this lamb could not come in contact with a reminder of the evil inflicted upon them. And while eating the lamb all must "be fully dressed", "sandals on feet", and "staff in hand" - ready to go.

God also told the people that this night was a new beginning. God wanted the people to remember this time and share it to future generations. "You shall tell your child on that

day, 'It is because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt'." Telling the story in every generation — that God delivers those who suffer from oppression, that God works for the flourishing of the world — is a central task for those who trust in God. The testimony of those who have experienced the benefits of God's saving power is vital and necessary for God's work in the world to go forward. If we do not tell God's story, other stories will rush to fill the vacuum, and many of them do not lead to flourishing. Believers in every time and place participate in what the Jewish tradition describes as the ongoing repair of the world.

This was re-ordering time. This day would be considered the first day of a new calendar. What God was doing was, in a way, a new creation. History would start at this moment. We all have moments that are defining moments in our lives: births, weddings, deaths, but we usually don't throw away our calendar and start anew. But what God was doing was so important, so life-altering, that it had to be remembered in a different way.

Much later, Passover celebrations possessed these characteristics: haste, fear, and death. Jews were hounded out of nearly every country in the world: England, Spain, Germany, France. And when they were not hounded out, they were stigmatized. It became Christian practice in many places to use Passover as an occasion for Jewish humiliation and assault. Too often Jews were forced to celebrate in haste because monstrous so-called Christians were at their doors, axes and hatchets at the ready.

"This will be a day of remembrance for you", despite the terror that accompanied many Passover celebrations down the centuries. It is to be a "perpetual ordinance", something to be done wherever Jews wish to remember their past and to celebrate their salvation through YHWH.

The placing of the blood of the lamb on the doorpost is a reminder to Christians of the death of Christ. The blood allowed the angel of death to pass over and spare the first born Hebrews. Christ's blood in a way also protects us from sin and death.

Now, imagine the logistical nightmare that Moses was handed. He had to tell the entire nation of Israel that they each had to:

- 1) take a perfect year-old lamb,
- 2) on the 10th of the month,
- 3) slaughter it on the 14th of the month at twilight,
- 4) roast it with bitter herbs,
- 5) no leftovers allowed,
- 6) eat hurriedly with sandals and staff.

Oh, and by-the-way don't forget to put some of the lamb's blood on your doorpost—or the angel of death will snuff you out.

I can't imagine standing in front of even a small congregation and giving those instructions, and expecting anyone to really take me seriously. Someone would surely think they had a better lamb. Someone else always hates to be in a hurry, and prefers to jabber through meals. And, someone would check the calendar on their Smart Phone and realize that they have a conference call on the 14th at twilight—how does the 15th work for you?

Low-ball estimates for the population of the Israelites at the time come in around 20-40,000. That's a lot of people to get a recipe to. And that's a lot of lambs being slaughtered at the same time. Why all the attention to detail? Why the logistical nightmare? Because this meal is the beginning point of a whole new identity for this community, the People of God. "This month shall mark for you the beginning of months." It's a whole new beginning, for a people who needed a do-over.

These were the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—they are the children and inheritors of the Promise of God, the Covenant—and they had been reduced to brick-making-slaves. They needed something to help them begin to break away from everything they knew and start over ... like a wedding reception ... like a 50th surprise birthday party ... like a baby shower—only bigger!

Life on the other side of the split sea, on the other side of slavery, would be completely different—and they were going to do it together—and with the help of God. This meal would begin to form them into a new kind of people. And, the fact that God would ask them to have this meal over and over again into perpetuity would solidify their new

identity - until, of course, the people of God needed another do-over. And so, on the night before Jesus died, he sat down at table to have this meal once again, and offered his own Body and Blood.

Passover is an important holiday for Jews as they remember when God brought them out of Egypt and slavery. Christians have a similar meal where we remember when Christ died in our stead to liberate us. The Lord's Supper or Communion or Eucharist was first practised by Jesus during Passover.

The call to remember is a way of taking a past action and making it part of our present. For Jews, Passover is taking what happened long ago and making it part of their present. Jews don't say, "We remember this night how God led those people long ago out of Egypt and through the Red Sea." Instead they say to each other, "We remember this night how God led **us** (rather than 'those people'), out of Egypt and through the Red Sea." Past and present are joined together.

For the Israelites, the way to ward off this plague came through the shedding of blood as innocent lambs are slain and their blood is then gruesomely splattered on doorposts. There was finally no free and easy pass given to anyone. If you lived, it was because a lamb died.

Here again is a parallel to the death of Christ on the cross. Passover is a reminder of the salvation of the Hebrews. But that salvation came at a cost. So it is with our salvation. We are free in Christ, but only because of the death of Jesus.

The ritualized meal and the words surrounding it witness to the living God in such a way that a new generation comes to "own" those central stories and traditions as their own, thereby coming to know God more truly and love God more deeply. In the rich context of a community of faith and all its practices, "their" story becomes "our" story. "Their" God becomes "our" God.

The Passover meal continues to this day as a central festival for the Jewish tradition. The meal also has meaning for Christians as a background and resource for our ritual meal of

Holy Communion. Many of Passover's elements and themes clearly carry over into the Lord's Supper. The Synoptic Gospels all testify that Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper as part of his Jewish celebration of the Passover meal "on the night in which he was betrayed", with his Jewish disciples. Jesus provided guidance and instruction to "do" this ritual "in remembrance of me".

All of the Gospels place a narrative or story immediately after the account of Jesus' instructing his followers in ritual practice which is intended for ongoing future observance. That narrative is the defining Christian story of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Just as the Passover story defined the core meanings of the ritual meal of Passover, so the story of Jesus' death and resurrection defines the core meanings of the Lord's Supper. Ritual and narrative work together as mutually interpretive.

Many other elements in the complex set of images and themes attached to Passover spill over and inform the complex meanings and images of Holy Communion. They include: remembrance and actualization; past becoming present; deliverance from bondage and death; association with the death of the firstborn son; the lamb that was sacrificed; darkness and night; the blood that protects from death; the wine of the Passover meal; the unleavened bread. All of these elements bind Passover with the Lord's Supper in a rich matrix of ritual and meaning.

Whenever we come to the table, we come to remember the story - the Passover ... the Crucifixion ... the Resurrection - and all of the hope and assurance this story brings. We come to remember the story of God's deliverance, to tell the story again, to make this story our story, and to enter the ancient story. We remember that God in Christ Jesus delivers us, sets us free, redeems us ... and makes us His people, reminding us that God is indeed good ... all the time.

Amen.

PRAYERS of the PEOPLE -- OCTOBER 6, 2024

God, just as You rescued the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt, setting them free to worship and serve You, so You have also rescued us, setting us free from slavery to sin and selfishness, and inviting us into relationship with You and one another. We praise You for the love and mercy You have shown toward us. You call us to love and serve You by loving and serving our brothers and sisters, near and far; to put their needs and interests ahead of our own, and so to fulfill Your law of love. And so we offer our prayers for the world You created.

We pray for Your church, the Body of Christ on earth. We pray that we would be a living example of Your love in our world, treating one another with compassion and respect, settling differences with mutual respect, love and integrity, bound together by our common allegiance to You. Open our hearts to see one another, and to respond with Your love.

We pray for peace and reconciliation for our multifaith partners. Especially we pray for peace for Jewish faith communities and their leaders as they prepare to celebrate Jewish new year, Rosh Hashanah, tomorrow. Tomorrow also marks one year since the Israeli and Palestinian conflicts escalated, and with it the increasingly anti-Semitic rhetoric, rising conflicts, hate crimes, and atrocities that have occurred. In the upcoming days when they are reflecting and remembering the trauma and grief experienced in this past year surround them with your protection, strengthen and and sustain them as they gather for prayer.

Holy God, we pray for Dunbar Lutheran in Vancouver and the BC Synod Staff and Synod Council; our sister congregation in Peru, San Juan Camino d'Esperanza and Pastor Ana Maria Jara; the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land; for our Bishops Susan and Kathy; newly elected Bishop Carla Blakley in the Eastern Synod; Bishop Anna, acting Primate Archbishop Anne Germond of the Anglican church in Canada; all pastors, priests, deacons, lay leaders, musicians, and volunteers as they lead their congregations in these challenging times of climate change and natural disasters around the world.

God of peace, we pray for peace in Ukraine, Israel, Palestine and Lebanon, Iran and Syria. We pray for all leaders that hearts would be changed and there would be a peaceful ending to this escalating conflict that threatens to become outright war. God of comfort and strength, we pray for all those are suffering in this war – those who are innocent victims living in these regions of the world; those who live

in fear amid the destruction of their homes and communities; those who have to flee to seek safety; those facing a bleak and uncertain future; those who mourn the loss of loved ones, the injured, and vulnerable ones. We pray for those who continue to try to provide aid and medical care – workers who risk their lives. Bring us all hope, bring us all strength, bring us all peace. In your holy and life-giving name.

We pray for the millions of refugees and migrants around the world, looking for homes and safety, a place to dream and live in peace, free from wars, conflicts and violence. Protect and support all the homeless in our own communities and around the world. Help them find refuge and keep them safe.

We pray for those who do not have what they need in order to survive let alone thrive; those without enough food and water, medical care, shelter, or security. Open our hearts to see the needs in our world, and to respond with your love.

We pray for all who suffer from physical, emotional and mental illness. We uplift Bishop Kathy and Pastor Kristen Steele; and we remember those in hospital and long-term care facilities and all who are known to us that we name aloud or in the silence of our hearts ... Support all who are undergoing therapies and treatments including those with addictions. Bring them healing and hope. We pray for all who care for them. Give skill and understanding to all who work for their well-being.

We remember those who have no work, who are struggling to provide for their families, and who despair of ever finding employment again. We pray for those who are living in poverty or in tenuous work situations. Open our hearts to see the needs of the unemployed, the underemployed, the seasonal and gig workers, the migrant workers, and help us to respond with Your love.

We give you thanks for the opportunity to work, learn and rest. Help us to serve you and others faithfully in our vocation and through the use of our spiritual gifts for the common good. Bless all places of learning, teachers, students and support staff. Help them to learn what is good, true and beautiful, to distinguish between right and wrong, and to become equipped to contribute meaningfully to our society Give them strength and growth for the challenges ahead. Encourage all eligible individuals to use their civic rights and responsibilities to participate and vote in the upcoming provincial election.

We thank you for the financial gifts you have blessed us with. Teach us to use these gifts in ways that are pleasing to you. Redirect our thoughts, priorities and

goals when we falsely put our hope and aspirations in worldly belongings and wealth. Grant our church, and every faith community, the necessary financial resources to carry out its work of ministry and mission.

God, we long to do our best. Encourage and equip us to carry out your will for our lives. Comfort us, be a blanket for our souls when we grow weary or feel discouraged. Hold us in your loving arms when we cannot hold ourselves. May we know, love, and serve you and each other in humility even when we cannot do all that we would like to do. May you bless all our efforts and use them towards your eternal purposes. In the meantime, may we hold onto your promises, and your precious and beautiful name as we lean ever closer to you. In your holy name, we pray.

Amen.

God in Community, make us all one Body, as we pray,

Our Father ...