

# “Remember this Day”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – October 2, 2020*

World Communion Sunday

Rev. John Wahl

Exodus 12:1-13, 13:3-10

Last Sunday, we read the story of Joseph and his brothers and how the entire family of the Israelites migrated to Egypt. They grew in number and were prosperous and safe...until a new king rose over Egypt, who did not remember Joseph. That Pharaoh began to imagine that the Israelites were dangerous, so he oppressed and enslaved them.

Enter Moses; he was saved from a terror campaign initiated by the king which killed every Hebrew male child, drawn out of the Nile – ironically – by Pharaoh’s daughter and raised as her own. After an altercation that ended with Moses killing an Egyptian, he fled into the desert, where he married and tended the flocks of his father-in-law. God met him in the desert – in a burning bush – and called him to go back to Egypt and set his people free. Moses and his brother Aaron spoke with Pharaoh who refused to let the people leave, and so God began to send plagues on Egypt. We pick up the story in between the ninth and tenth plagues, on the eve of the Israelites’ escape from Egypt.

Chapter 12 begins with instructions for preparing a final meal before their departure. God is telling the people of Israel they would need to eat hurriedly because God was going to force Pharaoh’s hand. Just as Pharaoh sought to destroy the Israelites by killing their young boys, now a spirit would come for the firstborn of Egypt. The people of Israel were to put the blood of a lamb on their doorposts so that the spirit would “pass over” their houses.

The instructions for preparing the meal were incredibly specific. They use bread without yeast because they had to eat in a hurry. They eat bitter herbs as a reminder of their suffering. The lamb should be obtained on the 10<sup>th</sup> day, then slaughtered on the 14<sup>th</sup>; it was to be roasted, not boiled. Why did this matter? Because in the waters of Egypt, the Hebrew male children were drowned at the Pharaoh’s command. The water brought death and so the lamb could not come in contact with it.

God also told the people that this night was a new beginning; that they should remember this day and share it with future generations. In fact, it was a re-ordering of time. This would be considered the first day of a whole new calendar. What God was doing was, in a way, a new creation: history would start at this moment. God calls upon Israel to remember, and to ritualize, what would be the central event in their story: deliverance from bondage in Egypt.

Passover is an important holiday for Jewish people as they remember what happened long ago and make it a part of the present. Jews don't say to each other, "We remember this night how God led those people long ago out of Egypt and through the Red Sea." Instead, they say, "We remember this night how God led us..." Past and present are joined together.<sup>1</sup>

This story also has profound meaning for Christians because it reveals that delivering people from oppression is a core feature of God's character, and because of its connection to understandings of the death of Jesus: the Passover lamb. Our sacrament of communion was first practiced by Jesus during Passover; and in our celebration of this meal, we remember that Christ died in our stead in order to liberate us. For us, the ritual of the Lord's Supper is a portal to a different time and dimension; the same feast that our ancestors have celebrated for centuries.

On this World Communion Sunday, as we are drawn together with Christians around the world around Christ's table, it is important to remember that the offer of such a table comes to us in times of suffering and trial, hope and despair, and that we are called to never stop extending the offer of a welcoming table which is wide and open to all.

The bread and cup that we share each time we take communion were originally the unleavened bread and traditional Passover wine kept by our Jewish sisters and brothers over countless generations. Jesus reclaimed these symbols of God's grace and care and filled them with new meaning for his followers; becoming images of both how he offered his life for us in loving service, and what it means for us to offer our lives in the same way for others.

The meal of remembrance Jesus introduces at his final Passover is built upon the many meals he shared in people's homes and in public fields, where sometimes a few loaves and fish were enough to feed all who came, sending no one away. This practice of opening the table to all, without judgment, would lead those who despise Jesus to call him "the friend of sinners."

Similarly, during the first Passover we read about today, the food that is prepared is intended to be share with as many families as you can fit around a table. The family or neighbor who cannot provide a meal for themselves are welcomed by the ones with more than enough to share. Later in scripture, we learn that it is not only ethnically Jewish people who leave Egypt and settle the Promised Land, but a mix of people – including some Egyptians and people of other racial groups – that go with them. This is because any who accept the welcome at the

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<sup>1</sup> Jacqueline Lapsley from *WorkingPreacher.com*

open table, under the shelter of those homes where Passover is being served, in homes marked by the blood of the Passover Lamb, are saved.<sup>2</sup>

We live in a time – with all the fearful headlines, with what is called a plague ravaging our nation and planet, with racial injustices on full display, and with lack of work, food, and shelter stretching some among us to their limits – we live in a time when it would be easy to hunker down, shut our doors, and forget about others. It is easy to only trust or let in those people who are like us, whatever that means. It is easy to forget to keep the table open.

And yet, it is choosing such fear and putting up such walls that the stories behind both Passover and Communion say are the ways to destruction. In Exodus, the reason the plagues sweep through Egypt is that they had embraced a mindset of scarcity; since they believed there was not enough to go around, they had decided to control, abuse, and even seek to destroy the growing people of Israel. It is this fear that hardens Pharaoh's heart so that he hoards freedom from the Jewish people, rather than offering it with an open hand. The Passover meal, with its blood on each doorpost, is called a *sign* in Exodus, a reminder that in the midst of the suffering then, and a reminder in all our suffering since, that we are not alone. God is present with us; in even the worst moments, God is at work to set us and others free.

Similarly, for Christians, the bread and cup that Jesus institutes at his last Passover meal also become *signs*; reminders of how God – along with meaning, hope, and faith – are found in the midst of suffering: first, Jesus's suffering in his betrayal and death; and, also, our own experience of suffering in the generations that follow. A part of what we acknowledge in breaking bread and drinking the cup is that our callings to be people of God are never without cost but mean that, like Jesus, we may at times be broken like bread and poured out like wine.

In both meals, rather than explaining why suffering happens, what is affirmed is that God is present in the midst of suffering as the One bringing liberation and new life. Why must there be mistreatment, enslavement, suffering, genocide, and plagues before the Jewish people would gather around their Passover meals? Even now, we cannot answer. But at these open, welcome tables, we can see how God is present in suffering, transforming enslavement into liberation.

In the meal we will share today, we are reminded that, as the bread is broken, it brings healing; and as the cup is poured, it offers new life. If we likewise approach the suffering we see around us with openness – expecting God to be present in it, and to bring liberation and life from it – it can bear the fruit of

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<sup>2</sup> Micah Royal, "Feast of Freedom"

healing and new life today. World Communion Sunday challenges us to continue to be people of welcome, people of open sharing, people committed to love and serve others even when it is costly or hard. At the same time, it reminds us that in these trying times, and always, our world can look more like this open table – and what a difference it would make.<sup>3</sup>

Moses said to the people, “Always remember this day... You shall tell your child on that day, ‘It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.’” “On Passover,” the late Ruth Bader Ginsburg once wrote, “Jews are commanded to tell the story of the Exodus and to see ourselves as having lived through that story, so that we may better learn how to live our lives today. The stories we tell our children shape what they believe to be possible.”<sup>4</sup>

Telling the story in every generation – that God delivers those who are suffering from oppression, and that God works for the flourishing of the world – is a central task for those who trust in God. If we do not tell God’s story, then other stories will fill the vacuum, and many of them do not lead to flourishing. We may feel like we have received communion – and even celebrated World Communion Sunday – so many times that it has become an empty ritual. But we do it in order to tell a story – and we do so in remembrance of Christ – because without it, we might forget that God is here with us; that God is healing and comforting and feeding us; that God desires for us to flourish and to be free. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> *Narrative Lectionary Reflection*, “A Dinner to Remember”

<sup>4</sup> *American Jewish World Service*, “On Passover”