

First Presbyterian Church
Exodus 12:21-32, “The Passover and God’s Justice”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 10/15/2023

Today’s service comes at a time of immense pain and suffering
in Israel and Palestine. Many of us have been distraught
over the horrors inflicted by Hamas against innocent civilians
and by the constant shelling and imminent assault
aimed at Hamas that has killed
hundreds of innocent Palestinians.

This is an amazingly complex conflict that goes back generations.

What we speak about today from the book of Exodus
may remind you of this conflict,
but I urge you not to draw easy comparisons or jump to conclusions.
The ancient people of Israel and ancient Egyptians are not the same groups
that we read about in the headlines today.
I can go into that in more detail privately if you’re interested.

What we see in this conflict is that violence begets violence.
We are *all* complicit in violence. We all need forgiveness.
And that is why the Passover is so important for us to consider.

Later in today’s worship service we will remember Christ’s death and resurrection
through the meal he instituted in the upper room with his disciples
the evening before he died.

We call this meal “communion” or “the Lord’s Supper” or “the eucharist.”

Even more than sermons, songs, or prayers, the Lord’s Supper
is the most distinctive and foundational symbol of Christian worship.

But Jesus did not simply invent this tradition.
This is not a clever idea he had when he realized he would be killed
through a conspiracy between the Jewish and Roman rulers.

The Lord's Supper is the Passover meal of Israel transformed
by Israel's Messiah.

We cannot understand the depth of what the Lord's Supper means
without first understanding
how the first Passover meal came to be.

The book of Exodus tells that story,
and in the 12th chapter the conflict between Pharaoh, the god-king of Egypt,
and Yahweh the Creator of the Universe, comes to a climactic peak.

Last week we saw how the first nine plagues sent upon Egypt
displayed the power of Yahweh, over the false gods of Egypt
by overwhelming the aspects of creation
that these false gods were associated with.

All of the first nine plagues were leading toward death,
but in this final 10th plague Israel is literally delivered
from death and freed from their bondage as slaves in Egypt.

Though all people are God's children,
the Passover meal is what set apart the Hebrew households
from the Egyptian households that night.

This is why the redemption of Israel is uniquely connected with the 10th plague.

The Passover reveals the paradigm of salvation.

We see in this event how God's salvation graciously
comes to us through faith in God's redemptive work
which brings us from death into life.

Redemption. What does that word mean?

It is a word from the slave trade.

To redeem a slave is to pay the price
that releases them from their duty to serve
and makes them a free person.

In Exodus 6:6 the word is used for the first time in the Bible:

**“I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under
the yoke of the Egyptians.**

**I will free you from being slaves to them,
and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm
and with mighty acts of judgment.”**

The Passover is about redemption from a life of slavery and death
under the hand of Pharaoh into freedom and life under the hand of God.

Michael Morales notes that

“the Passover redemption is so significant that God reorients time itself,
making the month of Passover the first or chief
month in Israel’s liturgical calendar.”

Chapter 12 begins with a remarkable line that indicates this very fact:

“This month is to be for you the first month of your year.”

In other words, rip up your calendar, throw out your planner,
delete your palm pilot. ... (Does anyone still have a palm pilot?)

Everything starts over right now. That reveals how immense this event was
for the Hebrew people.

In v. 21, where our reading begins today,

Moses instructs the elders to select animals for all the families of Israel
and to sacrifice the Passover lamb.

Earlier instructions indicated that this was to be a spotless lamb,
indicating purity and distinction.

In v. 22 they are instructed to take hyssop, a bush used in rituals of purification.

They are to dip the hyssop branch in the blood of the spotless lamb
after it has been sacrificed.

This blood is then put on the frame of each home’s doorway.

V. 23 says that when the Lord goes through the land,

the blood on the doorframe will cause the Lord to *pesakh*, to pass over,
and not allow the destroyer to enter their houses.

Now this word, *pesakh* or “pass over” is used in other places in the Bible to describe someone who hovers over another in a protective manner.

So it’s not just that Yahweh skips these homes,
but more that Yahweh presides over them in defense.

We’ll see why this matters later on.

The lamb’s sacrifice is the price of their redemption,
but what really matters here is the faith depicted by those who
do what Yahweh has commanded.

The lamb itself is to be roasted over a fire and eaten.

They take the holy lamb, set apart for God’s purposes,
and they consume it along with unleavened bread.

This meal is to be eaten in haste because it is preparation
and sustenance for deliverance. They will soon be fleeing on foot.

The Passover ritual sets the Hebrews apart from the Egyptians,
purifies them by faith that Yahweh will win victory
over Pharaoh’s way of death.

There are strong connections between the sacrifice of the spotless lamb of Passover
and the sacrifice of the spotless lamb, Jesus Christ, and the Lord’s Supper.

Early in Jesus’ ministry, John the Baptist pointed him out and proclaimed:

“Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”

In the book of Revelation, Jesus is depicted both as
“the lamb who sits on the throne,” and as “the lamb who was slain.”

Jesus was the spotless representative of Israel who shed his blood on the cross
in order to win victory over death itself.

When we trust in who Jesus is and what Jesus has done
in his death and resurrection it provides a way out
from slavery to sin and death.

In the Passover meal that Jesus celebrates with his disciples
he tells them that the bread is his body, and the wine is his blood.

In the Lord’s Supper we celebrate the Passover
recognizing that Jesus is the Passover lamb
who brings redemption to all who are enslaved.

Not just those enslaved to Pharaoh or some other oppressive master,
but also to all who are enslaved to sin.

Jesus did not have his life taken from him but he willingly offered it up,
knowing that judgment for all ways humanity has gone its own way
had to be accounted for in order
to reconnect the Creator and the creation.

And so we see that what's at stake in the Exodus confrontation
between Yahweh and Pharaoh
is not only God's plan for Israel, but God's plan for all humanity –
including the Egyptians.

All along, God had promised that Abraham and Sarah's descendants
would be a blessing to all families on earth.

Ultimately, that would happen through the sending of Jesus
to be the Suffering Servant / Anointed Messiah
that Israel could never attain on their own.

This could only happen by fulfilling the other promises God made
to Abraham and Sarah: to make their descendants a great people,
living in a land of their own.
The whole story of the Bible emerges from these promises!

Do you see that the Hebrew people's enduring slavery in Egypt
made all of this impossible?
“God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son,”
but in order to do that God first had to rescue
the children of Israel from Egypt.

And yet, while Israel's households were spared,
tragedy came to the homes of the Egyptians that night.

Now, if you are like me, you are taken aback by the idea that Yahweh,
who came among us in the person of Jesus,
would kill any child, let alone every firstborn son in Egypt.

The text is clear that Pharaoh had killed the baby boys of Israel,
and Pharaoh was one of them.

It is clear that Yahweh gave Pharaoh numerous other chances
to repent but Pharaoh's heart was too hard.
And it is clear that in order to fulfill Yahweh's
promises to Israel and all creation,
this final plague against Egypt was necessary.

Even so, there is some indication that this terrible act
was not done directly by Yahweh.

While Yahweh first takes responsibility for the killing of the firstborn,
Moses suggests something slightly different in v. 23. It reads like this:
**“When the Lord goes through the land to strike down the Egyptians,
he will see the blood on the top and sides of the doorframe
and will pass over that doorway, and he will not permit
the destroyer to enter your houses and strike you down.”**

“The destroyer.” We don't get any more detail on who “the destroyer” is here,
but in Psalm 78, the Psalmist says that God unleashed against Egypt,
“a band of destroying angels,”
and that God “gave them over to the plague.”

Additionally, in the New Testament we see Satan described as
the one who comes “to steal and to kill and to *destroy*” (John 10:10).

God is the Creator, not the destroyer. What I see in this detail is evidence
that God allowed the destructive force which empowered
the violence of Egypt all along to be unleashed on Egypt itself.

An analogy to this approach is found
in the modern Japanese martial artform, Aikido.

According to one Aikido training center, “An Aikido student harmonizes with,
rather than confronts the linear attack and converts
the energy of that linear attack into a circular energy that,
ultimately, renders the attacker or attackers helpless.

Literally, Aikido translates as ‘the way of harmony with the spirit.’”

http://www.craikido.com/About_Aikido.html

With this in mind, Pastor Greg Boyd writes that frequently in the Old Testament,
“the cosmic enemies that Yahweh usually holds at bay
are depicted as being unleashed to carry out Yahweh’s judgments
on nations that are themselves depicted as cosmic enemies.”

What if, like in Aikido, God uses the pre-existing momentum of evil
to defeat the purposes of evil in the 10th plague against the first-born?

What if, over the course of the 10 plagues,
“God gradually withdrew his protection and allowed a ‘band of destroyers’
to defeat the ‘gods of Egypt’”?

What if, in this way Yahweh allowed,
“the sins of Egypt to recoil back on their own heads.”
(Boyd, Crucifixion of the Warrior God, p. 1183)

What if God allowed evil to punish evil,
and mourned the death of each innocent first-born
just as much as the death of God’s own first-born
would be mourned on the cross of Christ?

However it happened, it is a horrific event.
Perhaps it’s an event that reminds us of the unspeakable, senseless events
that have taken place in Israel over the past week.

These horrible deaths of God’s innocent children in moder-day Israel
and in the Gaza strip point me toward the cross itself.
Not the Lord’s Supper meal, but the horror of Christ crucified.

On the cross, God allowed an innocent, blameless, perfect being
(who was actually the fullness of God’s own being) to be killed.
God stood back and did not Passover his only begotten son.
The evil of the whole world was allowed
to rush in as Jesus became sin for us.

And yet in the midst of this ugliness, this despicable act,
we see (through the eyes of faith) God's character, love, mercy, and grace
more clearly than at any other point in the biblical story.
How is it that such brutish evil and divine beauty come together so clearly?
Because on the cross, as in the Passover, God uses evil to defeat itself.

On the cross of Jesus, as in the Passover, God uses evil to defeat itself,
and to lift up all of creation through the victory of the resurrection.

And so here, in this final and most terrible plague,
within the burden of sacrifice,
we see the paradigm of our own salvation.