

“Hurry! Freedom is Coming!”

In today’s passage from Exodus 12:1-28, the Israelites are introduced to a regularized liturgical practice that commemorates and reenacts the saving events of the Exodus story. The liturgical practice precedes the saving event. Biblical memory is converted into routine practice. After many years of oppression, the Israelites are going to be freed. This is their exodus. Our scripture today recounts the liturgy of Passover. In Christianity, the parallel event is the “Last Supper,” which has been converted into the “Eucharist” or “Communion.”

One could call what we read today a manual for right practices. The instructions are concerned for a certain kind of blood and a certain kind of food. This practice will become a festival, which revolves around the importance of the lamb, its supply, its distribution, and its use. It is critical that each family have a lamb. Sheep were a treasured commodity in this economy, so if needed a lamb could be shared.

In vv. 11-13, it is clear that those who share in the festival must be ready to go, ready to travel, ready to depart. They must be ready to leave in a hurry to reenact the memory that leaving Egypt is a dangerous anxiety-ridden business. We know from what happens later in the story that Pharaoh reneges on his promise to

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let the people go. He comes after them. They can never trust what he is going to do.

We read for the first time how the blood of the lamb is connected with the Exodus and the freedom from oppression. In the judgment of Egypt, Yahweh will pass through the land and will kill every firstborn, both human beings and animals. The Israelites are instructed to take some of the blood and put it on the doorposts of the houses in which they eat the lamb. The blood will be a sign so that when God sees the blood he will pass over and no plague will destroy those who are protected by the sign of the blood. The blood functions as a sign of the fundamental distinction God makes between Israel and Egypt.

The second command in the passage concerns the festival of unleavened bread (as distinct from the Passover). The term for festival (*in hag*) is the same word used for worship. Three terms are required for the festival. First, it is important to have unleavened bread. Second, this special diet shall be followed in all generations. Third, anybody who violates the practice and uses leavened bread shall be cut off from the community.

Eating unleavened bread shows that the people left in a hurry and could not wait for the yeast in the bread to work and the bread to rise. It represents that when

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there is a movement to obtain freedom from oppression, the people should not be at ease. They should be in a hurry to get things done.

When we look at what this passage means for us today, we understand that we cannot sit around and wait for justice to happen. If Egypt and Pharaoh are to be seen as references to any agent of oppression and abuse (including one's own systems of injustice), then this festival evokes an important restlessness among the community. We must always guard against being complacent. When the community of faith no longer has the festival of urgent departure, it runs the risk of being unseemly at home with the injustices of empire. We cannot wait for the bread to rise. We must get things done now.

We must also understand the significance to us of the great destruction and violence that God's angel of death brought that night. The slaughter included infants, children and any who were firstborns, including, "the oldest child of the servant woman by the millstones, and all the first offspring of the animals (Exodus 11:5). Adam Hamilton, in his study *Moses*, writes that this was over one hundred thousand people and thousands of animals. This action seems inconsistent with a God who is "compassionate and merciful, very patient, full of great loyalty, and faithfulness." (Exodus 34:6).

The action by God that night of Passover actually brought an early Christian theologian to the conclusion that the God of the Old Testament must be rejected and not even considered the same God as the God of the New Testament. His name was Marcion and he received a strong following in his time. Although his beliefs were ultimately discredited, the fact that I am talking about him today means that there is moral tension in this story both then and now.

We have to look at the story of Passover as part of God's salvation story. At the time of Moses, the destruction and violence that happened that night was how God executed judgment. Jesus had not yet come to save humanity through his own sufferings, death and resurrection. Because of its own cruelty and oppression, Egypt had to suffer cruelty as judgement. Reflecting on this manner of judgment makes us realize how fortunate we are that Jesus took on the suffering and judgment we would have suffered for our own sins and cruelty towards others.

Besides the grief suffered by those who lost firstborns that night, the economic impact to the Egyptian empire was significant. Egypt lost a whole generation of workers. It lost valuable resources of animal stock. When combined with the loss of the cheap labor when the Israelites left, the Pharaoh's oppressive system was probably on the brink of financial failure.

Today when we engage in efforts to bring about freedom from oppressive and racist systems, there will be destruction of the status quo. Although we are not called to actual violence, the changes that need to be brought about may seem violent, at least figuratively, to the systems that are unjust. We must keep this in mind when those who want to keep the status quo question whether we should do anything.

We as the church should never be complicit in the maintenance of oppression. You may think that this is not possible. But it has happened. The Methodist church was originally opposed to slavery but as tensions arose in the United States during the 19th century over slavery, some Methodist ministers in the South, instead of opposing forced servitude, actually preached and taught that slavery was supported by the Bible. In one of the darkest days of our church, the ministers and the church sided with the economic wants of the slaveholders, their church members, over the freedom of those held in bondage.

We must understand that political abuse depends on theological warrant and support. In v. 12, God not only destroys the firstborn; he executes judgment on the gods of Egypt. It is not only the rulers and officials who need to be overcome, but also the gods of the empire who sanction oppression and legitimize abusive policy. We need to examine if the church itself is sanctioning oppression. It has happened

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before, and if we are working towards freedom from injustice today, the church and its policies may need to be reformed as well.

Although our story today could be viewed as only a story of destruction, we have to focus on the freedom that comes from God's actions. The blood marking enacts a large sense of protection from the midnight violence that is loosed on the empire. This allows us today to confess that we are cared for in a world that it is under profound threat. The blood of Jesus Christ protects us today.

And this story gives us a story to tell and to connect us to generations both past and in the future. It gives us a liturgy. This is even more important today when our usual liturgy has been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our ability to meet in person has been challenged. But the story of the Passover tells us we can adapt and learn something new. Even with all that we are going through, we can still reenact the savings events of the Exodus and bring meaning to our time today.

I read an interesting story in *Christian Century* of how one church adapted during Easter when it could not meet inside. Each member chose a rock from home, washed it on Maundy Thursday, brought it to the church campus on Good Friday, and laid it in a small clearing. On Easter morning, each church member returned to the campus and took a different stone away. Over the course of 36 hours dozens took part in a liturgy which created a makeshift burial mound that

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represented the tomb of Christ. And by Easter afternoon, the grave was empty, the tomb had dissolved, and the temple had indeed become us, the body of the risen Christ, a fleshy family held together primarily in time.

In closing, we are reminded that the basic components of liturgy are not only space but time, people and natural elements. Our own congregation adapted itself at Easter by having palm branches placed on the cross outside the church and having church members come by and pick one up for their family. In this time of difference and those seeking justice, let us learn from the Passover story to adapt our liturgy and be in a hurry to bring freedom to all. It will give us a story to tell the generations.