

## **Passover for Today**

Exodus 12:1-14

Sunday, September 13, 2020

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### **Old Testament Lesson, Exodus 12:1-14**

12:1 The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in Egypt, <sup>2</sup>“This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year. <sup>3</sup>Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household. <sup>4</sup>If any household is too small for a whole lamb, they must share one with their nearest neighbor, having taken into account the number of people there are. You are to determine the amount of lamb needed in accordance with what each person will eat. <sup>5</sup>The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect, and you may take them from the sheep or the goats. <sup>6</sup>Take care of them until the fourteenth day of the month, when all the members of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight. <sup>7</sup>Then they are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses where they eat the lambs. <sup>8</sup>That same night they are to eat the meat roasted over the fire, along with bitter herbs, and bread made without yeast. <sup>9</sup>Do not eat the meat raw or boiled in water, but roast it over a fire—with the head, legs and internal organs. <sup>10</sup>Do not leave any of it till morning; if some is left till morning, you must burn it. <sup>11</sup>This is how you are to eat it: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the LORD’s Passover.

<sup>12</sup>“On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn of both people and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. <sup>13</sup>The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt.

<sup>14</sup>“This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD—a lasting ordinance.

### **Sermon, “Passover for Today”**

With today's Old Testament text, we've stumbled onto a story which has shaped at least two nations. First and most clearly, it shaped the nation of Israel. But because it tells the story of how one people were freed from slavery; it has also had a profound effect on the shaping of our own nation.

One of the justifications for slavery in America was that bringing Africans to Southern plantations would put them in a place where they might hear the gospel and convert to Christianity. Then, they would be taught the scriptures, including Paul's admonitions in Ephesians 6 that slaves were to obey their masters (vs. 5-8).

Unfortunately for the slave owners, but fortunately for the slaves, once our slave brothers and sisters in Christ had the scriptures opened to them, they found a different narrative, a story of hope and freedom.

Think of it: if you're going to start reading the Bible—assuming some slaves had learned how to read—where would you most likely begin? At the front of the Book. Where did Paul tell slaves to obey their masters? At the back of the Book. What are you going to read first: a story of liberation from slavery? Or an admonition to obey the ones who own you? Liberation, of course.

I cannot possibly imagine what it would have been like to live in the squalor of slavery in America prior to the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation. But by all accounts, the story of the Exodus gave hope to a people living in an otherwise hopeless situation. And they expressed that hope in spirituals as they sang about freedom and the Promised Land. They sang “Go Down, Moses;” all eleven verses are found in our hymnal at number 448; the tune is named after Harriet Tubman, America’s own Moses.

If we dig into the story a little deeper, we'll find that hope was found in the holiness of God. And that's not where we would ordinarily expect to find hope, for we often associate the holiness of God with the anger and judgement of God, or at least to a strict adherence to an impossible set of rules and regulations. But God had the big picture in mind: God was forming a people and was calling them to holiness.

As slaves in Egypt, the Israelites were shaped by their Egyptian masters; now they were about to be delivered from Egypt; that meant they would be free and would have to be reshaped by their new Master: a God who is holy.

Today’s teaching from Exodus gives us several aspects of holiness which marked that shaping process; this morning I would like to focus on three.

First, you must choose a **Holy Sacrifice**. The Israelites, of course, had no way of knowing that the Passover Lamb foreshadowed Jesus Christ, whom John the Baptist described as the Lamb of God, who had come to take away the sins of the world. Likewise, the Passover Lamb of Exodus 12 was to die in the place of the Israelites.

That brings up the uncomfortable fact that there is something quite unsettling about the Passover story. Certainly, from Israel’s perspective, it is a story of hope and liberation. But if you read the story against the grain, you may ask yourself, “Didn’t God love the Egyptians, too? Why did so many Egyptians have to suffer and die?”

It sounds like God is an unjust God.

Let me submit to you that from God’s perspective, *everyone* deserves to die, Egyptian as well as Jew. As Paul later writes, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” and “the wages of sin are death.” In other words, the Israelites deserved to die along with the Egyptians; God was simply offering to them a path of grace. Likewise, we are invited to accept the grace of God for ourselves and become a part of God’s covenant community.

Often overlooked is the fact that the way to the Promised Land was open to the Egyptians as well as the Israelites. Exodus 12:38 tells us that “many other people went up with” the Israelites as they left Egypt and began their journey to the Promised Land.

Who were these “many other people”? They were foreigners, including Egyptians, who had decided to be a part of God’s covenant community. Perhaps they had been persuaded to join the Israelites because of the ten plagues; they came to realize that God is truly a God of power and might. What that tells us is that Israel’s mission wasn’t all that different from our mission. And our mission, of course, is: **We exist to connect people to Jesus Christ.**

God chose Israel not to exclude others from the holy community, but to shine forth as a light to all nations, that they might be compelled to join the holy community and be connected to God.

The second step in the shaping process is to be willing to participate in **Holy Sharing** with your neighbor. If your household was small, invite another to share the lamb with you. This indicates the Israelites were to practice holy stewardship, but they were also being formed into a *community*, as opposed to a collection of individuals.

The Israelites engaged in holy sharing as a prelude to freedom. Likewise, we are called to freedom and liberty. But liberty is not the same as independence. Yes, as a nation we declared our independence from Great Britain in 1776; but in doing so, we became the *United States of America*. We are free, but we are not free from each other. We depend upon one another and we support one another. We are not called to be a nation of individualized loners. Rather, we are called to live in peaceful community with one another.

Finally, the Israelites were to be shaped by **Holy Memories**. In verse 8, the Israelites were to eat the lamb with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. The bitter herbs were to remind the Israelites of their bitter hardship as slaves in Egypt and the unleavened bread was to remind them of their hurried escape from Egypt.

Please allow me to share my opinion about something that is happening in our country today. But I believe my opinion is shaped by scripture.

This past Tuesday, Loras College in Dubuque removed a statue of the school's founder after officials there learned new details about his slave-owning past. Apparently when Catholic Bishop Mathias Loras lived in Mobile, Alabama in the early 1800s, he bought a slave woman named Marie Louise. When Loras later moved to Dubuque, he hired her out to others and used the proceeds to help build various ministries in Dubuque.

College officials have placed the statue in storage. However, slavery is part of our nation’s bitter past, and rather than hiding every trace of the fact that we were once a nation that tolerated slavery, why not use statues such as the one of Mathias Loras as a

reminder of from whence we came. Mark it with bitter herbs. Better yet, why not erect a statue of Marie Louise and place it beside the statue of Bishop Loras as a reminder of our bitter past. Clearly, we are a better nation today than we were in 1839 when Loras College was founded.

It took forty years of wandering through the desert for the Israelites to be shaped into a nation. Even then, many Old Testament scholars would argue that the Israelites had a long way to go; the mindset of slavery was still deeply embedded in them.

As America continues to grapple with lingering effects of slavery nearly 160 years after Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, it occurs to me that part of our racial struggles comes down to the fact that once slaves were emancipated, they were never really given the chance to be shaped by their new master, which, for sake of our discussion, we might say is Lady Liberty. Yes, there were many pockets where blacks were allowed and even encouraged to be shaped by Lady Liberty—Fredrick Douglass and Booker T. Washington come to mind—but in far too many places, especially in the South, former slaves and the descendants of slaves were shaped by racist oppression, rather than liberty: more bitter herbs from our American experience.

How are holy memories shaping you? As believers, we are called to be a people who know how to cherish sacred memories, for our sacred memories give us strength for today and hope for tomorrow. When David faced Goliath, he remembered how God had been with him as he faced both the lion and the bear and how he had triumphed over them. So David faced Goliath, knowing that God was on his side. And he faced that giant armed with nothing more than a slingshot, five smooth stones, and the holy memories of past victories.

It wouldn't be long before the Israelites would call out to God and Moses that they wanted to go back to Egypt. So soon they forgot the bitter herbs and how bitter their enslavement had been. So soon they forgot the unleavened bread and how swiftly their deliverance had come and how miraculously their freedom had been won.