

PRELUDE TO FREEDOM: 3. GOD ORDAINS

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Exodus 12:1-14

In two weeks, on Sunday October the first, we are going to have an All-Church Breakfast. During the Sunday school hour, between services, instead of going to classes, everyone is invited to gather in the fellowship hall for breakfast. The purpose of this meal is for the folks from the two different services—who may not normally see one another—to get to visit. And, of course, to have breakfast.

That Sunday, October 1st, being a first Sunday of the month, is a day that we normally celebrate communion. It also happens to be World Communion Sunday. So in recognition of World Communion Sunday, we are going to conclude our breakfast with the celebration of communion. Instead of having communion during the early service and the late service, we will create a third service that day in the fellowship hall.

If you think about it, this makes sense. Our communion originated at the Passover meal which Jesus observed with his disciples. It was at the table that Jesus imparted a sacramental quality to the bread and the wine when he says, *This is my body, this is my blood*. In the early church, communion was often observed as a community meal. In Corinth, it seems that the meal was not a potluck but that each person or family brought their own food—picnic style. This created a problem because the wealthier Christians were hauling in sumptuous meals and eating in front of the poorer folk who clearly had less. It was if this table here was dining on steak and champagne while these folk had beanie-weenies and water. The apostle Paul is forced to address this gross disparity in his letter to the church (I Cor 11). He castigates the offenders by asking, *Don't you have homes to eat and drink in?* Eat your fancy meals at home or bring enough for everyone.

The origins of our Communion (or Lord's Supper) can be found in the ancient celebration of the Passover—that night before the Israelites fled Egypt for freedom.

The sermon today is the third in a three-part series from the book of Exodus about God's measures to bring the Israelites out of slavery and into freedom. The Israelites were an immigrant people who had been residing in Egypt for generations. For three centuries, however, they had been held as slaves forced to build cities for the Pharaohs. Their cries of despair and anguish are finally heard by God who remembers the covenant made with Abraham.

During this time Moses is born. He is a child of the Hebrews. One day, he encounters an Egyptian beating a Hebrew. Moses intervenes and kills the Egyptian and hides the body in the sand. Moses is forced to flee the country, so he heads across the wilderness to Midian. In Midian, he marries a daughter of the priest of

Midian and goes to work for his father-in-law as a shepherd. One day, while shepherding far from Midian on the slopes of Mount Horeb (which we also know as Mount Sinai). God appears to Moses as a burning fire in the midst of a bush. God informs Moses that God has heard the cries of the Israelites in Egypt and God intends to send Moses to convince the pharaoh to allow his people to leave.

In that first sermon I asked the question, “What is your call; what is God calling you to do?” because, I believe all of us are called to some task, great or small. In the second week, we looked at how Moses argued with God that he was not qualified to do as God called him. The passage shows us that God responds by equipping Moses for the task at hand. Moses returns to Egypt. He rallies the Hebrews around him. He goes before the Pharaoh and demands the release of his people. The Pharaoh refuses so God sends the great plagues on Egypt. After nine of these plagues, the Pharaoh is still stubborn and *stiff-necked* so God plans the tenth plague—the death of all first-born males in Egypt, human and animals. This brings us into our reading for today—the institution of the Passover meal.

In this highly ritualized, liturgical passage we find a clear and specific instruction on how to observe the Passover meal. The purpose of the meal is to be an eternal reminder of what God has done for the Israelites.

According to this passage, each family or household must secure a lamb (or the kid of a goat)—an unblemished, one-year-old animal. If a household is too small to consume an entire animal than it can join with a neighbor. They shall keep the lamb for four days and then on the 14th day of the first month, *the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter [the lamb] at twilight*. They shall take some of the blood of the lamb and smear it on the doorposts and lintel of the house where the lamb will be eaten. They shall roast the lamb and eat it that very night along with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. There are to be no leftovers. Any remains shall be burned in the fire. Furthermore, this is not a leisurely feast, but the meal of a people on the run. *You shall eat it with your clothes on, your sandals on, your walking staff in your hand. And you shall eat it quickly*. On that night, following the meal, God will pass through Egypt and kill every firstborn male in the land—human and animal. However, God says, *When I see the blood, I will pass over you*. The blood of the lamb on the doorposts will protect Hebrew families from the plague of death.

The Hebrew people—God’s people—had suffered in slavery and while they had mostly forgotten God, God remembered them. God heard their cries of despair and anguish and sent Moses as an emissary to deliver the people from the Egyptians, to lead them to a new land, a land of freedom, a land of promise. This monumental event is not to be forgotten. As the scripture reads, *This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance*.

To this day, the Passover meal—known as the Seder—is one of the most significant events in the Jewish year. Although, as Christians, we don't typically observe Passover, we do recognize that it is the Passover meal Jesus was observing when he instituted what we know as the Lord's Supper or Communion.

Remembering is important. When we don't remember then we will relive our past mistakes over and over. When we choose to remember then we at least have a chance to learn and grow. The Passover meal is instituted as a *perpetual ordinance*, a remembrance of what God has done. All this started because a king forgot. The Hebrews were living comfortably in Egypt until, as we read at the beginning of Exodus, *Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph*. All this begins because a king forgot how Joseph the foreigner had once saved Egypt from famine. Joseph had been a savior to the Egyptians and now the Egyptians had enslaved his people. God wants the Israelites never to forget.

If you ever have the opportunity to attend an authentic Seder meal, do so. The meal is a lengthy ritual with each dish playing a part. The bitter herbs, for example, serve as a reminder of the bitterness of slavery in Egypt. In the ritual, even the children play an important role. They are given questions to ask. The meal is not just for remembering; it is for teaching as well.

Our Christian celebration of communion has its roots in the Passover meal. This sacrament is layered with theological nuance. The early church quickly identified Jesus as the sacrificial lamb whose blood marks our salvation. The broken bread represents his broken body; the wine is his blood. I could preach for a year on the theological implications and subtleties of communion, but it all boils down to remembering. Each time we celebrate this sacrament, I use these words: *This is my body, given for you. Do this in remembrance of me. This cup is the new covenant sealed in my blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink it, do this in remembrance of me.*

As Presbyterians, we recognize this is a table. It is not an altar. An altar is for sacrificing and we understand that the sacrifice has been made—2000 years ago. This is a table—the Lord's Table. It is here that the Lord serves us a meal. Just as food sustains us, God sustains out. At its basic level, the celebration of the sacrament serves as a regular reminder of God's salvation through Jesus Christ. Something we must not forget.

I understand that often when we take communion, it can be just a ritual. On any particular day, it may not be a life-changing experience for us. That's okay. The value of ritual is in its repetition. It will there for us when we are ready. We participate because we are called to remember, to never forget this *perpetual ordinance* instituted by God.

On October 1st, I hope you will make an effort be here for the All-Church Breakfast and then as the assembled congregation of God's people—along with Christians the world over—celebrate the sacrament and remember.