

Please read today's preaching text from Exodus 12:1-13 and 13:1-8.

Grace to you and peace from God our heavenly Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

Every so often, there are singular events that define a generation. One such event is Woodstock, a rock music festival held in rural New York in 1969. I thought of this because in our story from Exodus today we have an event that defines countless generations, and it would not be a stretch to say the course of history. Now before going on, it is helpful to ask, "Well, how did we get here?" Last week's story was about Jacob's sons and in particular Joseph who ascended to power in Egypt. It was by God's bringing about good from evil that Joseph became Pharaoh's right hand and was able to save many people from dying of famine. Today we journey on to the book of Exodus, a book that begins with a brief report of the fulfillment of the promise given to Abraham, that he would be the Father of a great multitude. It says, "the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them" (1:7).

However, in the very next verses, we learn that the Israelites, God's people, were made into slaves by a new Pharaoh and this king used his "Egyptian supremacy" to kneel on the necks of the Israelites. These verses state, "they set up taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor... the Egyptians became ruthless... and made their lives bitter." In the midst of this account though we also hear, "but the more they were oppressed, the more [the Israelites] multiplied and spread." So without a doubt, God continued to be with them and by the end of the first chapter we learn, "Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant" (1:24).

Now, to fast forward, Moses was born and saved in the basket in the river, God called Moses from the burning bush, commissioning him to go to Pharaoh and say to him on God's behalf, "Let my people go." Pharaoh, being full of himself, of course refuses. He believes he and his false Egyptian gods and his powerful army and taskmasters can freely sow terror, death, and destruction among the Israelites with little to no consequences. Well, fast forward some more and we recall how God sent plagues upon Pharaoh and

the Egyptians, nine of them to this point. Even still, with every plague Pharaoh doubles down and refuses to listen to Moses and God's call that "Israelite Lives Matter."

And, with that, we get to chapter twelve which begins in a most solemn way, "The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt." And the words that follow are God calling on "the whole congregation of Israel" to remember and to ritualize this event from the very first. God is going to deliver Israel from bondage in Egypt and we might say, 'God is deadly serious.' God gives very clear and strict commands about the when and the what and the how. Take note though that with the choosing of a lamb, God is also teaching ethics here. If one family cannot afford to provide a lamb, it is the responsibility of a better-off neighboring family to share what they have. This event is to build community; something that has to be intentionally cultivated. Even in, or maybe *especially in* times of crisis, think of the welfare of others — be kind and compassionate to one another! God is instructing them, this isn't just about you and your own individual rights and freedoms.

The people are also instructed that the lamb is to be sacrificed and "take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and on the lintel of the houses in which they eat it." And further, "Eat the lamb that same night... with unleavened bread and bitter herbs." The unleavened bread is because there isn't time to allow the bread to rise and the bitter herbs will always serve to remind them of the bitterness of their time of oppression. And there is one more word of instruction that is a bit curious, "let none of it remain until the morning." In other words, no leftovers or "to-go boxes." Why? Well, here again, God is teaching them. This time they are being taught to trust in God as deliverer *and provider* of food. Leave behind both hoarding and scarcity and instead, from this night forward, embrace faith in God who gives us this day our daily bread.

The final words of instruction about how to eat the meal are of a practical nature. Be ready to be on the move. Have your robe tucked up, sandals on your feet, your staff in hand, and eat quickly — don't be caught scrambling at the last minute in a panic. When God is ready to act, we need to be ready as well. God says, "For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt..."

But God assures the people, “when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you.”

Many of us are troubled by the use of divine violence at the center of this story. Sure, Pharaoh is violent in his use of force, his oppression is ruthless and it sows death, but why does God have to respond with violence? It’s a provocative question, no doubt. We all know the saying, “You reap what you sow.” In other words, Pharaoh and Egypt are just getting what they have coming; after all, “What goes around, comes around,” right? But that isn’t entirely satisfactory, is it? Because it wasn’t just Pharaoh that paid the price, the slaughter of the firstborn took the lives of plenty of innocent people, who were also created in the image of God. And while no answer may be satisfying, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks observes that while we may rightfully rejoice in the triumph of justice and the defeat of evil in the world, we are also called on by God to always identify with the suffering of the victims.

I noticed another possible answer to our troubling question. God says, “on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord.” What those words remind me is that God is God and I am created in God’s image. I am not able, nor should I ever presume, to create God in my image. However, it is our human nature is to want to know, it gives us a sense of control. But this desire to have our eyes opened, to be like God, knowing good and evil can also go too far. After all, it was with that temptation that we messed things up right from the very beginning in the garden! God and God’s ways are, and always will be, above and beyond our knowing and we just need to learn to live with that. If you don’t believe me, read the book of Job, particularly from chapter thirty-eight on, wherein God answers Job out of the whirlwind.

Well, as you might guess, these chapters in Exodus could be the focus of an entire preaching series but we’ll close by looking at the last verses of today’s reading. Following the passing over of all the Israelite homes, and the destruction of the Egyptian firstborn, Pharaoh finally relented and said to Moses and Aaron, “Go, worship the Lord, as you said” (12:31). In chapter thirteen then, Moses is telling the people, “Remember this day on which you came out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” But he then talks

about the future, “When the Lord brings you into the land... flowing with milk and honey, you shall keep this observance.” And further, “You shall tell your child on that day, ‘It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.’” This event is not only to be remembered as something long ago but it is something that all of the people from generation to generation are to understand as having participated in themselves. God did this for *me when I* came out of Egypt? Yes! You and me and all of us are to believe and trust that God is our deliverer. It is far more than a past event but it continues to be a current reality. And that gift is something to be celebrated and to be thankful for on an ongoing basis.

As Christians, we participate in God’s ongoing deliverance from the grasp of Pharaoh and his violent armies, from oppression and sin and death, in and through the sacrament of Holy Communion. We do so as Jesus tells us to take and eat, this is my body and this is my blood. It is the blood of the new covenant, given and shed by Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. There can be no greater gift, for through this gift we receive forgiveness and new life. Amen

Narrative.3 Exodus 12:1-13 and 13:1-8

October 4, 2020

Pastor Jonathan Zielske