“A Perpetual Ordinance”

Sarah Wolf

Exodus 12:1-17

September 6, 2020

We are finished with our “I Love to Tell the Story” sermon series, but wouldn’t you know that where we pick back up with lectionary just so happens to be in the Exodus story. Last week, we learned about Moses’s beginnings in the river: how he was drawn out of the river by Pharaoh’s daughter and raised as her own.

Since then, Moses has grown up in Pharaoh’s house. As an adult, he killed an Egyptian overseer and fled to Midian. He married and had become a shepherd when the famous burning bush scene occurs. In the burning bush, God tells him that through Moses God will deliver the Hebrew people and take them to a land flowing with milk and honey. He pairs Moses up with his cousin, Aaron, to help him make his big overtures to Pharaoh.

Moses returns to Egypt and commands Pharaoh to let his people go. Pharaoh refuses and so God sends the plagues. Seven of them: water turning to blood, frogs, gnats, flies, diseased livestock, boils, thunder and hail, locusts, and darkness. Each time, Pharaoh’s heart remains hardened, and he refuses to release the Hebrews.

Then comes God’s announcement of a tenth plague: the death of the firstborn of every living thing in Egypt, humans and animals alike. It is a truly devastating plague — one that is just as disturbing then as it is today.

Today’s text picks up after the announcement of this final plague, with God instructing Moses and Aaron as to how the Hebrew people will avoid the devastation of this plague of death.

Listen now to God’s word for you from Exodus 12.

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight.

They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its heads, legs, and inner organs. You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn.

This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the Lord. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgements: I am the Lord. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

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. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread; on the first day you shall remove leaven from your houses, for whoever eats leavened bread from the first day until the seventh day shall be cut off from Israel. On the first day you shall hold a solemn assembly, and on the seventh day a solemn assembly; no work shall be done on those days; only what everyone must eat, that alone may be prepared by you. You shall observe the festival of the unleavened bread, for on this very day I brought your companies out of the land of Egypt: you shall observe this day throughout your generations as a perpetual ordinance.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

I met a woman this week who started talking about events that had happened in the past. She kept talking about things she used to do “BC.” I finally asked her what “BC” meant and she laughed and said, “Before Covid, of course!”

Once I realized what “BC” meant, I had to laugh with her. Because now I am realizing how much I judge past events as either being “BC” (before Covid) or DC (during). New Years Eve? That was BC. Ash Wednesday? BC (thankfully). Easter? DC. Unfortunately. With this woman’s joke about BC and DC, I’ve realized that this is how I’m measuring time lately.

And I don’t know about you, but I can’t wait for PC - Post Covid.

What’s on your to-do list when this is all over? Where will you go first? What will you do first? Who will you visit first?

For many of us, it feels like we’re living in an in-between time, anxious and impatient to cross over into the “after” — After Covid, after quarantine, after a pandemic of separation.

The people of Israel were also living in an in-between time. They’d seen this Moses and his commands to Pharaoh. They’d seen 9 plagues come and go. They’d swatted the gnats, shooed the frogs out of their living spaces, and avoided drinking the river of blood.

They were really beginning to hope that things were going to change — that God actually *was* going to deliver them from slavery in Egypt with the help of this Moses fellow. They’ve been whispering at worksites, over dinner at the end of a long day, by the well in the morning. “Could this be real? Is this the end of our time here — the end of our enslavement?” Things have reach a fevered pitch in Egypt.

And then God pauses everything and launches into a litany of instructions.

The momentum that has been building as each plague descends upon the people of Egypt, each one worst than the last, comes to a screeching halt. Where we would expect the apex of a crescendo, instead, we get an instruction manual involving sheep and goats and girded loins.

God hands down these detailed instructions about sacrificing a goat or a sheep on the tenth day. The goat or sheep should be without blemish. They shall eat everything they can and destroy the rest. They shall put some of the blood of the animal on the lentel and doorposts of their houses and that is how God will know to pass over their homes when the angel of death comes to town. And from generations on, the Hebrew people shall remember this night and tell it to their children as the night God passed over the people and delivered them from Egypt.

University professor Charles Pinches describes God’s instructions using King James language as such:

1. Thou shalt rightly mark thy calendar.

2. At appointed times thou shalt stop working and

begin celebrating.

3. Thou shalt assemble and eat together.

4. As thou dost assemble and eat together, thou shalt

follow certain sorts of peculiar rules.

5. Thou shalt listen for thy children’s questions and

answer them.[[1]](#footnote-2)

There is momentum building in Exodus and then everything comes to a screeching halt in this passage. Why? Because this passover event is important.

Like remembering the names of Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives from last week, remembering these instructions from God are important for the Hebrew people because they will become instructions not only for that one night, but for all of their worshiping lives. It will be the focal point for generations to come.

Later on in chapter 12, Moses tells the people, “You shall observe this rite as a perpetual ordinance for you and your children. When you come to the land that the Lord will give you, as he has promised, you shall keep this observance. And when your children ask you, ‘What do you mean by this observance?’ you shall say, ‘It is the passover sacrifice to the Lord, for he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when God struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses.’”

Moses tells the people, when you observe the Passover, you participate in remembering what God has done for you, no matter how many years have passed. Observing the Passover is an active event; it isn’t passive. It forces the Israelites to remember the before - years of slavery in Egypt. The during - the plagues, the uncertainty, the chaos of the plagues and the slaughtering of the sheep, and flight from Egypt. They are to re-create this scene year after year, retelling the story to each new generation, giving thanks for God’s deliverance from the “before” to the “after.”

We count our lives as a series of befores and afters. Before and after a birth. Before and after a death. Before and after a marriage. Before and after a divorce. We measure our experiences in the before and the after.

These life events interrupt the day-to-day and change us. The Hebrew people were deep in the turmoil of slavery, each day looking like the one before and no hope for change on the horizon. And then all of a sudden, everything is different. Pharaoh has been made powerless next to the omnipotence of God. A lifetime of slavery no longer seems guaranteed. The passover is a *big* event that interrupts and changes everything.

During this pandemic time, our lives have been interrupted and changed as well. We have had to re-prioritize. We’ve had to reassess what is important. We are still in the “during” — each day seeming like the one before and the one after, praying for a vaccine, praying for our congregation to be able to gather again.

But the big question is, when this is all over and we find ourselves in the “after,” how will we remember this time? When this is all over, what stories will we tell our children and grandchildren? What takeaways will remain with us? How will we mark this time?

One of the things I hope will remain with us is the idea of the sacred space of home. When we can’t worship in the sanctuary, we can look for the sacred in other places.

The Hebrew people discover the sacred space of home in today’s passage. As one author notes, “In this passover narrative, the sacred space of the home is lifted up as families are marked with the sign of God’s faithfulness, and beyond this veil of blood they respond to God’s promise … the family home is set apart and becomes a place of encounter with God and indescribable shalom in the midst of fear and uncertainty.”[[2]](#footnote-3)

During this pandemic, it is important that we set aside a time and a place in our homes that can become sacred spaces where we encounter God and shalom in the midst of fear and uncertainty. As these instructions from Moses interrupt the Hebrew people’s fear and planning, may our weekly worship interrupt our day-to-day lives at home, trying to figure out virtual learning, trying to figure out working from home, trying to figure out solitude in a pandemic.

Interruptions aren’t *all* bad, but maybe we’ve been trained to view them that way.

The first communion was an interruption. As an observant Jew, Jesus celebrated the Passover with twelve of his disciples on Maundy Thursday in an upper room. Jesus’s ministry had also reached a fevered pitch. He was in Jerusalem. It was jam packed with people. He had created quite a stir with his entrance on Palm Sunday. If you’re reading the Gospel of Mark, then on Monday, he has cleansed the temple, enraging the authorities. He has been telling the disciples about his impending death and resurrection for quite some time now. Judas has already betrayed him to the authorities and is waiting in the wings to hand him over. Things have been building.

And then Jesus…pauses. And observes the Passover, giving instructions of his own. In Luke, Jesus tells the disciples, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” He might as well have used Moses’s words of “perpetual ordinance” with the disciples. In this first communion, which is originally an observance of the first Passover, Jesus tells the disciples and the generations that follow — do this in remembrance of me.

For the disciples, this week will be fulcrum on which their befores and afters pivot. There will be their ministry *before* Jesus institutes the first communion and gives them a new commandment to love one another — a before filled with teaching and learning, miracles and conflict. And there will be an *after* — filled with questions about the future of the movement, the future of Christ’s church. But it all orients around this moment in communion which sustains them, gives them fuel for the journey, and provides a point of return for all of Christ’s followers. When things get bad in the early church, when there is great conflict, the Church can always gather together, recite these holy words, recognize, reflect, and remember who has called them to this hard work in the first place.

In a few moments, we will all celebrate communion. It will look different, depending on where we are. There are only a handful of us in the sanctuary today. The rest of you are probably at home. Some are in your living rooms. Some in your home offices. Some around your kitchen tables.

But even though we are separated by physical location, the love of God and the knowledge of God’s movement in the lives of all of God’s followers, from the generations that followed Moses to us today, the knowledge of that love is still just as real today, no matter where or when we are: in the before, the during, and the after.

So I encourage you as we celebrate communion in a few minutes, not to go through the motions. But think through the instructions in today’s Exodus passage:

Rightly mark your calendar. Remind yourself that this is the Lord’s day. It is set apart from the rest of the days. Stop working. Put away your to-do lists. Put away your worries about school or work and *celebrate*. Celebrate communion today.

Remember in your celebration. Remember the saving act of God in the Passover and in the first Communion with Christ and his disciples and the saving acts of God in our lives today.

Remember that the Passover provided food for the journey — for the Israelites about to embark on 40 years in the desert, for the disciples who were about to go through the most trying week of their lives, and for us today, as we face another week in isolation and solitude. God is with us still.

And when, years from now, our children and grandchildren ask us about this special time, listen to their questions and answer them. Tell them all about how this time forced us to reassess what was important to us. How it forced us to pause in the middle of our very full, very busy lives, and examine our priorities. Tell them how hard it was. But also, tell them how it jolted us awake to live a life in the “after” full of abundance and grace.

All praise be to God.

Amen.

1. <http://www.ekklesiaproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/Ekklesia_9.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1TBmVSfsM42t5h03dfHOAvF_IFUj6vBDNv7wlo7GOjJm81MPUr9rci_RI> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Feasting on the Word; Sean White [↑](#footnote-ref-3)