

14th Sunday after Pentecost

“A Day of Remembrance”

10 September 2017—Salado UMC

Preaching Text: Exodus 12:1-14

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: [2] This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. [3] 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. [4] 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. [5] Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. [6] You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. [7] 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. [8] They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.

[9] Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. [10] You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. [11] 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. [12] 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 judgments: I am the Lord. [13] 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.

[14] 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 (Exodus 12:1-14).

One of the reasons this apparently tedious passage from Exodus is important to us as Christians is because it is part of what Jews came to call the “Seder meal.” A Jewish Seder is a sacred ritual which remembers the Hebrews’ deliverance from Egyptian slavery. The word “seder” in Hebrew means “order,” and refers to the fifteen distinctive aspects of the Seder meal. As the ritual unfolds it tells the story of Hebrew liberation in a precise sequence that explains this pivotal story for Jews. It was this meal that Jesus adapted in the Upper Room on Maundy Thursday and established as our communion or eucharist ritual meal that we celebrate as Christians.

One day I sat in a Nashville, Tennessee hotel lobby waiting for a taxi to take me to the United Methodist Publishing House. While in that lobby I listened to a young woman give the

same purportedly polite, but decidedly routine speech to each and every customer checking out of the hotel.

“Yes, sir. Thank you for choosing Hampton Inns, West End. We thank you for your business and hope the next time you return to Nashville you will choose to lodge with us. Thank you for your decision to stay with us.”

The only problem with this “ritual of politeness” was that it was delivered precisely in the exact same monotone voice and never wavered from one customer to the next. I could only image some poor soul being locked out of his room, appearing in the lobby in a bathing robe, standing in front of the young women and she saying to him: “Yes, sir. Thank you for choosing Hampton Inns, West End. We thank you for your business . . .”

This illustration about ritual is a bad example of ritual. No one ever intended the idea of ritual to be words spoken by rote, without feeling or meaning. One can hardly imagine the story of Texas A & M’s “Twelfth Man” or the “A & M Tradition”—or any high school/college tradition—related in a lifeless and unenthusiastic way. When we recite the Pledge of Allegiance, do we repeat it without feeling and then say it has lost its meaning? I hope not. Anyone can turn our meaningful rituals into dry and pointless sets of words and actions, but ritual has a deeper—and what I would like to call a teaching purpose. Ritual helps us pass along those meanings and interpretations of our common life together that are bigger than the words we use to explain them. Consequently, ritual is so important in the life of faith.

This text has a rushed and time sensitive quality to it. Hurry! Eat with your sandals on your feet, your staff in your hand! Yet there is also a sense of timelessness: this Passover will be remembered forever: “throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance” (v. 14). Although Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year, arrives in September the text in addition reminds us that at springtime Jewish people recollect the grand story of the exodus. The Seder meal begins with the youngest child at the family meal table asks, “Why is this night different from all other nights?” This childlike question is always asked in present tense. The Jews look backward to the Exodus story, but they are also in the story—today. It is as if in the Seder meal the contemporary Jews are transported in time one again to Egypt and eat the unleavened bread.

Therefore, we can understand the seder meal—and communion too—as a meal of remembrance plunged into the present tense. It is also a meal that remembers the dear price of freedom from oppression and freedom in God. As a biblical commentator pointed out:

Over the centuries Jewish people have altered the Passover ritual to remember other cries for freedom. In April 1969 Jews and Christians gathered in the basement of a black church in Washington, D.C., to celebrate the Freedom Seder. This Seder marked the first anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., killed at a time near Passover. Words shared around the table acknowledged the blood spilled in past freedom struggles and called for an end to bloodletting in our own time (*Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 4*).

The Scientific American tells us (Francesca Gino, Michael I. Norton 14May 2013):

Recent research suggests that rituals may be more rational than they appear. Why? Because even simple rituals can be extremely effective. Rituals performed after experiencing losses – from loved ones to lotteries – do alleviate grief, and rituals performed before high-pressure tasks – like singing in public – do in fact reduce anxiety and increase people’s confidence. What’s more, rituals appear to benefit even people who claim not to believe that rituals work. While anthropologists have documented rituals across cultures, this earlier research has been primarily observational. Recently, a series of investigations by psychologists have revealed intriguing new results demonstrating that rituals can have a causal impact on people’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/why-rituals-work/>).

When we use the ritual of the church for communion, we, like our Hebrew forbearers, not only remember a meal long ago and far away, but we also sit at the table with Jesus and “eat and drink with the disciples” as if we were there for the very first time.

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