

Kerra Becker English
Maundy Thursday – 2016

Reading of Exodus 12:1-14

12 The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: ²This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. ³Tell 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. ⁴If 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. ⁵Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. ⁶You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. ⁷They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. ⁸They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. ⁹Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. ¹⁰You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. ¹¹This 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. ¹²For 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. ¹³The 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.

¹⁴This 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.

Meditation “Remember the Judgment”

This is a brutal story to be asked to remember. This plague on Egypt is the worst of the worst. Though Egypt was the oppressor and enemy, still it is a slaughter of the innocents. The first born of every un-marked household will be killed – and even the firstborn of the livestock won't survive this wave of destruction. Sadly, remembering this story has not deterred it from being repeated. Hot-headed Kings, and genocidal politicians, and even a crazed lone gunman or two have continued to remind us that this action was not a once-and-for-all-times event too horrific to ever have happen again.

It baffles my mind. It is especially awful that the one whose hands are bloodied by this story is God. God gives the Israelite people specific instructions as to how to carry out this violent revolution. It starts with the sacrifice of the year-old sheep or goats to be eaten for the feast. My hardcore vegan friend would say

that the violence could have been averted starting there. But even the preparations for this festival sound gruesome. Prepare the animal in this way for the Passover feast. Slaughter it at twilight. Splatter its blood on your front door to make sure your house has been properly marked to be spared. Eat the animal completely intact, roasted, hurriedly, with unleavened bread, and bitter herbs so that you are always in that state of readiness to flee the tyranny of your oppressor.

I understand that for the Israelites, this was salvation. They escaped slavery on a course to freedom and the Promised Land. But did it have to be such a violent escape? We ask the same questions now: Can we have a peaceful revolution? Can emancipation happen for the poor, for the oppressed without even more violence and innocent casualties? Do we have to brutalize our enemy to know that we have been successful? Are dead children an appropriate deterrent for further escalation? Is there such a thing as something worse?

Remember this story? I don't really want to. But oddly enough, God asks us to remember the cruel and horrific parts of the story even as we celebrate the freedom, the salvation that it brings. Maybe the bigger question is always about the suffering and how suffering and freedom seem to have this unlikely connection. Can we reach the Promised Land without a slew of plagues and tragedy? Can we broker salvation without a cross? The answers to those questions lead me to some very uncomfortable places.

Will there be freedom without sacrifice? Remember the judgment.

Reading of Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19

¹I love the LORD, because he has heard
my voice and my supplications.

²Because he inclined his ear to me,
therefore I will call on him as long as I live.

¹²What shall I return to the LORD
for all his bounty to me?

¹³I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the LORD,

¹⁴I will pay my vows to the LORD
in the presence of all his people.

¹⁵Precious in the sight of the LORD
is the death of his faithful ones.

¹⁶O LORD, I am your servant;
I am your servant, the child of your serving girl.
You have loosed my bonds.

¹⁷I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice
and call on the name of the LORD.

¹⁸I will pay my vows to the LORD
in the presence of all his people,

¹⁹in the courts of the house of the LORD,
in your midst, O Jerusalem.

Praise the LORD!

Meditation

“Remember the Forgiveness”

In the previous story, God gets the blame, or in some cases the credit, for inflicting great suffering against an enemy nation. Against the enslaver and oppressor, I understand how that plague, or that invasion, or that bomb could be perceived as the righteous violence of war, and yet the outcome is always so disturbing. What now? Now that we are not in immediate danger from so close an enemy, is God once again the comfort we hoped our Maker to be? Is it appropriate for us to turn to God for alleviation of our suffering, for the desire to be both healed and forgiven? Can God hear our plea, and answer our requests?

That’s the ongoing question, isn’t it? Just who is this God? A judge and punisher, or a healer and forgiver? The same people who yearly remember the plagues against Egypt with the feast of Passover are the same ones who write the poetic laments and heartfelt praise of the Psalms.

The God of this text seems less like a hired gun and more like a close friend. The Lord has heard MY voice, and MY supplications. Because God has listened to me, I will call on God as long as I live. The cup of salvation still is a difficult one to drink. It reminds us of our own mortality and our own skewed sense of morality. We all will die, and in the meantime, we will likely do awful things to one another. Save us, O Lord, from ourselves. Heal us and bind our wounds.

This is the call for mercy – not the call for retributive justice. It's personal, really, really personal and does not at all seem to presume contact with the avenging super-hero God of the Passover massacre. This God is tender and gracious. So again we ask the questions, "Who is God, and what will our relationship be to this God?"

Will there be healing in our own personal lives? Remember the forgiveness.

Reading of John 13:34-35

³⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Meditation “Remember the Love”

So now we find ourselves back to the words of Jesus. He was talking intimately with his friends during the Passover feast. As a studied religious leader, he voiced his own interpretation of this long-standing tradition. And the ironic twists that his upbringing brought to this meal were not lost in this moment. Here he was celebrating that his people had been saved by a God of vengeance who killed the firstborn children of the Egyptians, but in his early childhood, as God’s firstborn, he was the target of Herod’s widespread slaughter of infant males. A fairly significant turn is happening in this story. The lamb’s blood about to be poured out on this occasion – to save God’s people this time –is his own.

Once again, the covenant will be sealed with blood. Once again God is leading the way to salvation through brokenness. This is not a comforting story, not in the least. If we rush too quickly from Palm Sunday to Easter, we might miss some of those nuances, like we typically avoid putting Herod in the Nativity scene.

God commands that the Israelites REMEMBER the Passover. Jesus commands that when we eat and drink in his name, we remember to love. Jesus is serious about love too. Love your neighbor. Love yourself. Love your enemies. Love those who persecute you and crucify you. If you want to follow me, and I mean really follow me, then you will be known by one thing, and one thing alone, your deep and abiding love for one another.

This changes things. It changes the meal. It changes how we celebrate it anyway. God is no longer the vengeful judge but the suffering servant. Our claim that Jesus Christ is the Son of God makes that clear.

There is no one easy interpretation for what Jesus is about to do when he lays down his life for his friends – and even for his enemies. He's not claiming a chosen people. He is claiming ALL people. That's a little bit scary too. God is no longer "on our side" for punishment of the wicked. God takes the punishment for all our wickedness on himself in Christ Jesus. And this is about love. This is about the kind of love that perseveres through the greatest of suffering.

Will there be love among the followers of Jesus? Remember the story. Remember the love. Amen.