

Sermon – Passover. Exodus 12:1-13; 13:1-8

There's a lot in today's reading.

First, just a quick catch up – last week we came to the end of Genesis. The family that would come to be known as Israel was saved from starvation by traveling to Egypt. In Egypt, their brother Joseph oversaw a massive program to keep people fed during the famine.

At the beginning of Exodus, it's 400 years after Joseph. The Pharaoh who ruled Egypt became paranoid and suspicious that the growing numbers of Israelites would one day rise up against him. He enslaves them and forces them to make bricks for massive storage facilities. He tries to reduce their numbers and their strength by killing the first born male children of the Israelites.

Finally, God hears the cries of the Israelites and calls Moses to lead them to freedom.

At this point in the story, God has sent 9 plagues to try to get Pharaoh to let the Israelite people go. Pharaoh keeps hanging on. He doesn't want to lose their slave labor as a powerful engine of Egypt's economy. He doesn't want to lose his power over them. Now the most terrible plague of all is about to happen – death will move through the nation, killing the first born of all the Egyptians.

The Israelites are to smear the blood of the slaughtered lamb over the door posts. When God sees that blood, that household will be spared. Detailed instructions for the last meal in the land of their enslavement are given. They are going to dine and dash to freedom.

I'm not going to spend a lot of time on the troubling violence of God's action to kill Egypt's firstborn. But we should say a little about it. God's desire is for justice for God's chosen people. That promise given to Abraham, and then to Jacob, and Joseph, and then Judah...all down the line still stands. God chose Israel as the people through whom all of creation would be blessed. Literally the salvation of the world is at stake here. The Egyptians repeatedly refused God's offer to save Egypt if only Pharaoh would let the Israelite people go. It was not the first time, nor would it be the last that a people would suffer for the evils of their leaders.

That God finally acted with the 10th plague is a testament to God's intention to achieve justice. It's OK to recognize the tension here. That on one hand God's justice triumphs, but on the other hand, the Egyptians, also created and loved by God, will suffer terribly. It's a tension we can't really resolve.

I want to spend the rest of our time this morning on the last part of the passage. Every year from this night forward, the Israelites are instructed to re-enact the Passover meal. God gives them instructions on timing and duration of the observation. The meal should be prepared in the same way as that first Passover meal. The hastily prepared unleavened bread is to remind them of that quickly eaten meal before they fled.

God then says ⁸You shall tell your child on that day, 'It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.'

If you've ever been to a real Jewish seder meal, you know they still tell that story...they gather for the meal and they tell the story. Generation after generation hears again how God freed Israel. It is this same story that Jesus shared with his disciples on the night of his betrayal. The story was told again...but then a new story grew out of that Passover story...a story that Jesus told and one that he would ultimately enact on the cross. We re-enact that new story every time we celebrate Holy Communion.

Stories are important. Repeating stories from past events shapes the present and the future. History is made up of all sorts of things – dates, statistics, names, events and so on. But they don't impact us much until we tell the story. That story helps tell us who we are.

Stories give us a lens through which we see the world. Stories help us make meaning of past events and stitch them into a story that reaches far beyond the individual events. The story of God's work to free Israel would affirm that God chose them for a purpose and intends to see that through. Telling the story would affirm that the story of God's work to free Israel trumps the Egyptian story...that God's power is greater than Pharaoh's power.

We really have no other way to shape our lives outside of the stories we tell. If we are not telling the story of God's work to bring freedom and well-being, we will tell a story more like the Egyptians. Life is interpreted through the stories we tell and if God's story is not told, the Egyptian one will fill that void.

The Egyptian story is still alive. Its shape is altered by technology and global connectedness and millennia of progress. But the story is still alive. The Egyptian story is one of bondage. The Egyptian story told the Israelites their value was based on how many bricks they could produce. The Egyptian story told the Israelites that what mattered was wealth and production. The Egyptian story told the Israelites they were inferior to the Egyptians and deserved to be slaves. The Egyptian story told the people their God was powerless to save them.

God gave the Israelites a different story to tell...a story of freedom and the flourishing of life. We inherit that story of freedom and life through the cross of Christ. But the Egyptian story remains powerful.

So here's the question for the day. Are we telling the Egyptian story? Or are we telling God's story? Are we Egypt, or are we Israel?

We're conditioned to believe we are Israel...as inheritors of the promise through Christ, we assume that's who we are. But as a nation whose wealth was built on the backs of slaves, we have to recognize or own "Egyptianness" as well. As a people who continue to measure the value of a person by their production and their ability to produce wealth, we're more Egypt than Israel.

Did you notice that in the instructions for the Passover meal, families who didn't have a lamb should be provided for by the neighbors who did? Did you notice that the community would gather for this Passover meal...that they were in this together? It wasn't everyone for themselves.

Are we Israel...or Egypt?

The reality is, the world we live in probably makes us both Egypt and Israel. Some in our society are still told they are of less value because their work doesn't earn them enough to not need help.

The story we so often tell forces us into a world that measures everything like Egypt counted bricks...material worth, strength, athletic skill, intelligence...that story forces us into a world where we're never quite sure we measure up...we're never quite sure we're good enough or that we do enough... so we look for someone to be better than.

I would argue that the Egyptian story is the dominant story in our society. But that Egyptian story doesn't make any of us free.

The thing is, when God issued the promise that all the families of the world would be blessed, that included the Egyptian families. What happened to the Israelites in Egypt wasn't their fault. And countless Egyptian families suffered, too, for the stubborn arrogance of Pharaoh. None of it was God's will for humanity.

Over the following centuries, Israel repeatedly fell into the trap of the Egyptian story, too. They would repeatedly fall for a story that was not God's story. It's a powerfully seductive one.

For us, the promise of blessing comes now through Christ. In Christ, we are offered a new story, something more freeing than the Egyptian story. We're offered a story that no longer requires measuring up and comparing and a totally individualistic way of life.

We're offered the promise of knowing we are deeply and truly loved just for who we are, not what we can do or make or whether we can win a Facebook argument.

And...we are blessed with the freedom to love others, simply because they, too, are God's beloved.