

“Rest and Readiness”

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What if God doesn't come through? Worship in advance as if he will.

Exodus 12:1-14

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Jesus in the Old Testament

Preaching is about how you think and what you do. More often than not, we are re-minding you of what you already know, like a coach reviewing fundamentals. People often tell me they also like to learn something new.

But preaching is not only cognitive. Understanding the Bible should change how we live, what we do. At this intersection of God and life that happens in church, what should be my response? Today I want to preview the key take home points in advance.

1. Let Jesus reframe your holidays into holy days.
2. Identify symbols that point you to Jesus.
3. Rest in Jesus to prepare for the unknown next.

This fall our sermons are focused on looking for Jesus in the Old Testament, which is kind of like looking for barbecue in North Carolina. If you're looking for Jesus in the Old Testament, Exodus 12 is a Preschool Easter Egg hunt.

I'm going to say some things today that are no brainers. They are re-minders. But if you don't learn anything new, I'll mail you a dollar. Most importantly, I want you to make some connections to your every day world.

Moses

We begin by looking at the text itself, Exodus 12. Passover has a back story. Every story since Adam has a back story, and every Old Testament story points forward to Jesus, to us and to the goal of all human history, the glory of God. Genesis 1 pointed to Jesus when God created humans in his image. Genesis 3 pointed to Jesus because sin

needs an ultimate solution in Jesus. God called Abram as the father of a nation through whom he would bring Jesus. Last week we saw the first use of “forgiveness” in the messy family of Joseph. Jesus would extend grace to the entire messy human family.

More has been added to the back story since Genesis 50. Joseph rescued his people by bringing the family to Egypt, but a subsequent Pharaoh enslaved the Israelites for centuries. God called a reluctant adopted Egyptian prince named Moses to lead his people out of bondage. Pharaoh was even more reluctant, and now plagues of blood, frogs, gnats, flies, livestock disease, boils, hail, locusts, and darkness have terrorized the Egyptians, whose hearts have softened (Exodus 11:3). But Pharaoh’s heart is still hard, even after Moses tells him that every firstborn son in Egypt, including his own, will die.

So now we come to chapter 12. God is speaking to Moses and Aaron (1). Israel is getting a new calendar. This annual observance is to be their January (2). But the event doesn’t happen on the first day of the month; they are to wait for the tenth day. The first instruction is to set aside one lamb (or kid – see NIV footnote) per household (3). Don’t think Mom, Dad, and two children. Households were extended families, and there was to be careful planning for the size of the animal vs. the size of the household (4). Neighbor families could share a lamb (4). The kid or lamb must be flawless (5), and carefully supervised for four days. Every household would then slaughter the lambs at sundown (6), and apply some of the blood to their doorframes (7).

This is not a sacrifice for sin. No altar, temple, or priest is involved. The instruction is for the family to eat a three-part meal: roast lamb, bitter herbs, and unleavened bread (8). The entire animal is to be roasted, including “inner parts” (9), and all of it is to be either eaten or burned that same night (10). Furthermore, there’s a dress code. No one’s wearing pajamas, nor is it a relaxed, casual meal. Everyone is to be fully dressed, including shoes, ready for travel, and everyone is to eat quickly (11).

That same night the Lord will strike the firstborn of Egypt – men and animals – to judge the gods of Egypt (12), but the blood on Israelites’ houses will be a sign for the Lord to spare their homes from this plague (13). This festival is perpetual from that year on (14), and it is to be followed by an entire week of eating unleavened bread (15) with a worship service on Day 1 and Day 7, and no work done all through the week (16).

Passover wasn’t a totally new idea. The concept of a new year festival or a spring festival or both already existed in Egypt and among the Israelites. As long as there has been a sun and a moon and humans, people have found reasons for annual parties. Moses’ original request to Pharaoh was not to leave Egypt permanently. He asked for permission to take the people into the desert for a festival (5:1).

This is what prompted my first point of response: *Let Jesus reframe your holidays into holy days*. Some holidays have sacred origins and become secular. It’s happening more and more to Thanksgiving and Christmas. Others have secular origins, but believers reframe them. The Fourth of July is a national holiday, but people of faith see

God all over the story. Easter is a distinctively Christian holiday, but it was reframed by Roman Christians from their pagan festivals.

You don't have a lot of control of whether there's a holiday on the calendar or in the stores. It's up to you whether those days are holy in your heart and in your home.

Retail stores have begun displaying a variety of holiday items that will continue through late December – Halloween, Fall, Thanksgiving, Advent, Christmas, New Year's. The origin of the holiday is not as important to me as how you observe it as a believer. Trunk or Treat is a good example here at Corinth. We'll likely have more unchurched people on our campus than any other day of the year – including Christmas and Christmas Eve. Donate candy or set up a trunk, but also think about how you can have a spiritual conversation with our guests that day. Or plan ahead how this or any other holiday at your home can be a chance to represent Jesus well.

Passover and Blood

Here's a second take home point today. *Identify symbols that point you to Jesus.* I have another new wrinkle to add to your brain today. Passover is not mentioned in the Bible as often as you might think.

After the time of Moses and Joshua – the only generations with first hand memory of the exodus from Egypt – the only Old Testament references to Passover are during two spiritual revivals in Judah (under Hezekiah and Josiah), when Ezra leads the exiles back to the homeland, and in Ezekiel's prophecy of the restoration of the temple.

Well, how about the New Testament? Other than the Last Supper, Passover in the New Testament is most often just a passing reference to a calendar event – along the line of saying, "That year at Thanksgiving we all met at the beach."

There's one exception in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 5:7, Paul says, "For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed." But the festival is not his main point. He's talking about sexual immorality in the church, which he compares to "yeast" that "leavens the whole batch of dough." He tells the Corinthians to "get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch – as you really are." In other words, Jesus, our Passover lamb, has made us pure, so "let us keep the Festival, not with the old bread leavened with malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth." Paul's only direct reference to Passover, then, is not urging Christians (or Jews) to keep the ritual, but a reminder to live holy lives.

Peter doesn't use the word "Passover" in his letter, but he tells his readers that they were "redeemed with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect" (1 Peter 1:19, Pew Bible 1887). His argument too is more about living holy lives and loving one another deeply than it is about the atonement. Revelation also uses the image of Jesus as "the Lamb, who has been slain."

The festival is still observed regularly by both secular and religious Jews. Jewish tradition has made much of it. It's parallel to the Fourth of July for America or Holy Week for Christians. Some of the Jewish tradition is based on Exodus 12, but there's so much more. The Jewish Seder is primarily a family meal, though it can include other guests. It's an entire full course meal and a celebration, not like our small bits of bread and tiny cups of juice. Children are involved, from asking the four questions to finding the hidden matzah for a prize. There are ritual washings, prescribed blessings, four cups of wine, and unleavened bread. Passover ends opening the door for Elijah, reciting the Hallel, and proclaiming, "Next year in Jerusalem!"

There's some debate about whether Jesus and his disciples were eating the Passover meal the night Jesus instituted what we call Communion. That debate is not where I want to spend my time. Google it. What's true is that – intentionally or unintentionally – the Jewish Seder symbolizes key aspects of the Christian faith. If you're looking for Jesus in the Old Testament, Passover is a slow pitch soft ball. There are multiple points of comparison, but let's focus on the ones Jesus explicitly made.

The matzah is broken during the Passover Seder. Christians have pointed out that matzah is also striped, bruised, and pierced. What Jesus notes is that it's broken, and his body was broken for us. Jesus also takes a cup of wine and compares it to his blood. The Seder meal ritual includes four cups of wine, essentially toasts, recalling the four promises God made to the Israelites in Exodus 6:6-7, "I am the LORD, and *I will bring you out* from under the yoke of the Egyptians. *I will free you* from being slaves to them, and *I will redeem you* with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. *I will take you* as my own people, and I will be your God."

The third "toast" is the cup of redemption, and it is this one that Jesus was holding as he told his disciples, "This is my blood, which was poured out for you." It's been interesting this week to read about various Christian responses to "blood." Some Christians love talking and singing about blood, almost making it a point of orthodoxy to use the word as often as possible. Others are more reluctant. I suspect it has to do with two factors – whether blood makes you queasy and which Christian tradition you were raised in. I will say there's a lot more mention of blood in the Bible than Passover.

I'm not one who needs to drive the point home by becoming overly graphic. The Bible's not as interested in the gory details as it is blood as a symbol. Ancient people didn't understand the physical function of blood the way we do. Nobody even proved that blood circulates throughout the body until the early 17th century. But even primitive cultures for whom blood was a mystery spoke of blood rituals and blood feuds. Leviticus 17:11 says "the life of a creature is in the blood." Hebrews 9:22 says, "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness." Blood is a symbol; a representation of the reality of grace.

Blood is ubiquitous. Every time you see blood, which will probably be more often in the next few weeks, let it be a reminder of the Jesus, something that points you

to Christ, to the cross, to what Jesus did for you. When we look for Jesus in the Old Testament, we don't have to look hard or long. He's everywhere. And everywhere you open your eyes, there are symbols of how much God loves you, that he is everywhere. Yes, blood is one of those but it's not the only one. Don't let symbols become idols, but do notice crosses and lights and lambs and doorposts and peacocks and flowers and birds that point you to Jesus.

Why? Because Christ, the Passover Lamb, has given his blood for you. And that's your highest motivation to live a life of holiness, of sincerity, of truth. This week, look for reminders of Jesus. In the midst of suffering and joy and family and heartbreak and holidays and normal days, when you feel him and when you don't, Jesus is so interested in you. Open your eyes and see.

Rest and readiness

Finally, *rest in Jesus to prepare for your unknown next*. I want to return to Exodus 12, and to a quote I read this week from Walter Brueggemann. He points out several aspects of the original Passover that I might have missed. For one, the institution of the ritual precedes the event. In other words, God gives Moses instructions for how the Israelites are to recall the exodus before the exodus even happens. Exodus 12 precedes Exodus 13 and 14. Brueggemann calls this worship "pre-rational." Israel is called to faith, "the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1).

Think about this. You and your people have been enslaved for centuries, and Moses tells you to engage in a rather elaborate ceremony that will, for generations to come, remind your descendants that God delivered you. What if he doesn't? What if God doesn't come through? What if Pharaoh's heart is still hard? What if his chariots catch up at the Red Sea and he drags you back to slavery? What if you die of starvation or thirst or sword in the desert? How many times have you and I asked, "What if God doesn't come through?" Worship in advance as if he will.

Jesus does the same thing. He institutes the Lord's Supper before his disciples witness not only the cross but the empty tomb. "Whenever you eat this bread, remember me. Whenever you drink this cup, remember me." The disciples had no idea how that night and the next day – much less Sunday morning and the rest of their lives would play out. Jesus called them to trust him that this moment would not only be sacred but perpetual.

Brueggemann also adds this insight:

The Old Testament is Christian Scripture even while it is thoroughly Jewish, so this festival is a part of our Christian memory and identity. Christians, like Jews, are *children of these marked door posts*, marked for safety in the midnight of chaos and crying. Christians, like Jews, are *children of this hurried bread*, postured to depart the empire, destined for freedom.

This is the source for my sermon title: “Rest and Readiness.” I don’t know about yours at the moment, but my life is rampant with uncertainty. To be sure, it’s almost trivial when I make the comparison to Israelites and Passover or Jesus and the Cross. Nothing I ever have or will experience will rise to that level, so let’s just talk about where I’m living at the moment and maybe where you are.

Life takes so many unexpected turns. I knew it was my turn to preach this week, and thought I would have some time every morning in Leland plus all day Saturday. As it turned out, our granddaughter had two sick days so Linda and I tag teamed caring for her Tuesday and Wednesday. Then the plumber I thought was coming to install two toilets on Tuesday asked if he could switch to Thursday and I said sure. But he got sick Thursday and referred me to another plumber. They said they would be there at Noon, but they didn’t arrive until 4pm, changing our plans for the whole day. And no sooner did we arrive in Hickory Friday evening but I got the text that our dear sister Fonda Brittain had gone to be with the Lord. I spent a good bit of yesterday with the family.

When I think about the changes and alterations in our schedule, though, I think about how much more changed for Fonda Brittain and her family vis-à-vis what she and they had planned. Fonda was going to beat this cancer with the Lord’s help. She was determined and faith-filled. But life doesn’t always – life rarely – follows our plans.

This whole retirement and transition timeline for Corinth hasn’t played out like we planned. We should have known it wouldn’t!

Look at what’s happening today in Israel and Palestine in real time. Terrorism, war, genuine threats to life and freedom and normality. It’s not new. It’s been that way for these people for 3500 years.

On Passover night, the children of Israel have no idea what’s ahead on this night. They will hear screams from their neighbors and they will soon have to gird up their loins and get out of Egypt – to where? How? When? Will it take weeks? Try forty years, and most of them will die in the desert.

Then there’s Jesus and his disciples. He knows what’s coming; they don’t. But here’s what Passover and Communion have in common: rest and readiness. From now on you will know whose you are. The Israelites will know it because their first born were passed over. The disciples – the original Twelve and all of Jesus’ followers since – will know that same security, that identity, that rest because of the cross.

It’s precisely because of that rest, that knowledge that we are known and loved and uniquely chosen – that we can say, “Lord, I don’t know what the future holds, but I’m ready. In life, in death, in joy, in sorrow, in success, in failure, in the uncertainty of life, I’m yours. And in that knowledge, I’m good.” Amen.