

A Day of Remembrance
FPCS, Sept. 4, 2011
Exodus 12:1-14

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 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 house in which they eat. 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 head, 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 judgments. I am the Lord. The blood shall be a sign for you on the house 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.

Now firmly at the point in pregnancy where nesting has set in- that period many women and couples know as a time to get everything as prepared as it can ever be, for the arrival of a new baby- I have noticed that it is very hard for Bill or I to get rid of anything. An old stereo from college? Check. Lamps we inherited and never use? Check. But the bulk of what we keep is all done for the sake of memories.

So, in the midst of trying to organize a wee bit, I have done some unofficial surveying and come to a few conclusions about *how* it is that each of us remembers. We both hold on to pictures- of that trip to Scotland with friends his senior year of college, or that glorious day we graduated from seminary. He holds on to CD cases: where he's stored tickets to that Dave Matthews concert, or he remembers reading cover to cover the booklet from this particular U2 album. I hold on to scrap papers: where some of us wrote haikus to the copy machine that summer we worked at Montreat, or that note of comfort passed to me in church the Sunday after my grandmother died.

How do you remember?

As individuals, some of us have pictures, others a knick-knack picked up on vacation; some of us have particular smells that recall a loved one, or that song that always takes us back to a specific time and place.

As a nation we erect monuments and memorial sites- as we come upon the 10th anniversary of the attacks on September 11, 2001, our national consciousness is raised once again by the dedication of a new memorial and museum at Ground Zero.

As a community of faith we rely on stories- some to give us words for who we are and others to give us rituals to enact together in the process of remembering.

This story from Exodus is one of those latter types of story— a ritual-setting story. The story of the Passover of God; set in the context of the final plague against the Egyptians. These captives are in need of a visible sign that their God and Pharaoh are not one in the same.

No detail is left out, so that no misinterpretation is made. This is the beginning of months- time itself will be marked differently by this community from now on. All are to participate, and those who may be left out are to join with others. Everything is to be shared equally, and they must eat as though ready to go at any moment. All this alongside the disconcerting promise of God's judgment passing through the land and upon the heads of the first born of Egypt. Echoing from the parlay with Moses at the burning bush is this- I AM the Lord.

The first enactment of such a ritual draws this oppressed community together around a new identity. These people are God's people to be sure, not Pharaohs. Starting here, they can begin to reinterpret the trauma of slavery

through the lens of God's saving action. And so it is the second, the fifth, the hundredth, the thousandth time the community gathers to remember and to re-enact. Just as God tells them to here. For this is to be a day of remembrance for the people.

It is nearly impossible for us to hear this story and not make the connection to our own ritual practice of sharing bread and wine around a common table. Jesus was a good Jew- he celebrated Passover, just as he did with his disciples in the infamous upper room where our Maundy Thursday story begins. The apostle Paul ritualizes the meal further in 1st Corinthians. He gives the fledgling faith community liturgical language for an act they had been practicing since those very first days post resurrection when Jesus was made known once again to the disciples gathered in Emmaus. Do this in remembrance of me, we are told. Words inscribed beautifully on the front of our very table here. And so we do. Just as our Jewish sisters and brothers continue to celebrate Passover.

But why is it that we remember?

As individuals and families, we hold onto memories- onto specific things, people, times in our lives- because these things and people are all a part of shaping who we are and who we are becoming. They create for us a story of who we are- even if some of the pieces of that story are those that we'd much rather replace or lose all together.

As a faith community, we hold onto stories- onto specific people, events, creeds- because of much the same reason. These stories give form to who we are and who we are becoming. The Exodus story gives form to the beginning of a discernable Israelite people. These stories create the foundation for our call.

Yet in our life as a faith community, at the points where ritual and remembrance intersect- as they do here on the eve of the Passover and in the space of that upper room- we are urged into a different, *more perilous*, kind of remembering: an active remembrance. This goes further than hanging a picture or posting a flag, further than recalling a story or heralding a foremother of faith. In active remembering we are pushed to vulnerability. In active remembering we put ourselves back into Egypt on the brink of the wilderness, back into the upper room on the brink of betrayal and crucifixion, back on the Emmaus Rd on the brink of our resurrected Lord being made

known once again to us. In active remembering we are renewed in our call as a community of faith, as one body.

This is no easy thing to do. Our challenge, so many years later as we continue to enact these most important rituals in our life of faith, is to persist in making meaning of such practices that seem sometimes like we do them just because that's what we're supposed to do. That's what we've always done.

Just as the Jews are no longer slaves in Egypt, Christians are no longer a fledgling minority in a political system that claims divine status like that of Rome. Now it seems, there is much more on the line- for reputation, for social norms, for not conflicting the comfortable. It makes me wonder if, as we gather around this table, we have allowed the awe, the joy, the risky nature of what happens here to be lost. Lost in concerns for time, for order, for hygiene, for pomp. I stand here convicted, as I easily recall services where I have willed myself not to look at the clock as we begin the liturgy of communion; times when I've been ticking off my to-do list while receiving the tray of juice. In all of this, I wonder if our remembering of God's saving acts have become as pictures on the wall, as songs that bring up past good times, as stories we tell about what *happened then* rather than what is *happening now*.

Considering what is happening now, how God is saving now, leads us to ask some hard questions about the places of bondage in our own lives, and in the life of our communities. Bondage to fear, to anxiety, to debt, to abuse, to weighty expectations, to wealth. Who is not around this table that should be? Who is sitting in the pew, not sure that they are worthy even to partake? Where do we continue to suffer bondage and need God's passing over that will allow us to move towards freedom? And maybe even more tricky for us is this, where do we continue to inflict bondage and suffering on others- as individuals, as a society, as the church?

Consider this, in the Passover story we find the place where the faithfulness of God meets that of the people. The Israelites follow in this act because they trust that God will come through- they have no other choice in the matter really. But it is an extraordinary act on their part, to let go of what they've always known and venture out in trust. And of course God does come through- that is the crux of our entire shared story.

Out of our own bonds, and those that we create for others- we are offered at this table the chance to act once again with extraordinary faithfulness, trusting that God's own faithfulness is sure. At this table we are called to put

ourselves in the place of those just set free. This means that our first act is that of joy. As it so happens, this is a joyful feast of the people of God, for we know that God triumphed over death in order to give all creation new life. And from this joy comes the next step, recommitting ourselves (each and every time) to God's saving purposes in the world. Which means that no one remains in bondage, no one is made to feel unworthy, no one is pushed to the side at this banquet table.

In our remembering, we are set free to tell a story of hope that invites all to participate. And as part of the telling— our messy commission, our time-consuming call— is to re-enact it again and again so that we and others find the renewal promised here. This is how God is continuing our salvation story. Through you, through me, at this table, and out in the world. For us, remembering is an active verb- God is on the loose and beckoning us to the brink. Are you ready?