

Passed Over

Exodus 12:1-12

By

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September 4, 2011

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

September brings with it a fresh start to many commitments, including rededication to the faith we share. Just a few weeks ago, I assisted my son and his family with their move to a new apartment. I was much better at that sort of thing thirty years ago than I am today. But I still worked like I was 25 years old, and have the sore back to prove it. In order to get maximum use of the U-haul that was scheduled for 24 hours (we picked it up Friday night), we worked late into the night packing the truck. Most people don't move at night, unless they didn't pay the rent and are trying to slip out of town under the cover of darkness. The neighbors look at us quizzically that seems to say, "Are you guys for real, or should we be calling the police?" After four and a half hours of loading boxes and furniture and loose bags of clothing, we finally were able to have our dinner before bed. It was the traditional "moving day meal" of pizza eaten right out of the box and soda pop.

Our text today is about another "moving day meal," but of a different sort and significance. The people of God were on their way from slavery to independence but it began with a meal. Like a Fourth of July barbecue or Thanksgiving turkey dinner, a new nation was formed with a symbolic meal to remember the historical significance. Those who participate in that meal are reminded of the beginnings but they also relive the events and therefore now and forever become part of that experience, members of the Exodus, people who worship the liberating Lord of life and journey from slavery to freedom.

According to the Bible, God does some pretty amazing things at night, under the cover of darkness. I used to tell my teenage children that, "nothing good happens after 10:00 p.m.!" I am by nature a morning person and it used to drive me crazy to have my kids sleep in until mid-day! But I've had to recant my statement to them because the Bible is chock full of important things that happened at night.

It was when "the earth was formless and void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light' and there was light."¹

¹ Genesis 1:2-3

“In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.”²

“Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, ‘They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.’”³

“It is the Passover of the Lord. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night and strike down every first born in the land . . . on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord.” Worshiping the wrong gods (idolatry) evokes judgment. Worshiping the wrong things sets life in the wrong direction towards slavery rather than liberation, towards death rather than life. This is a story of God’s intervention to liberate a chosen people. This is the story of salvation, the story of our salvation. Salvation comes in many forms.

Nicholas Kristof writes this past week in the *New York Times* about his days in Tripoli, Libya. He writes, “. . . here in the Libyan capital I keep running into ordinary people who learn where I’m from and then fervently repeat variants of the same phrase: ‘Thank you, America! As I was walking back from Green Square (now renamed ‘Martyrs’ Square’) to my hotel on Wednesday morning, a car draped in the victorious Libyan flag pulled up and offered me a lift. ‘I just want you to feel welcome here,’ explained the driver, . . . he beamed when he heard where I was from and declared: Thank you, Americans. Thank you, President Obama.”⁴

The rebels have taken the capital of Libya, Tripoli, and sent Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi packing. Gone are the lavish dinners and the impressive displays of power. You can bet he left the palace in a hurry, taking with him only what he could grab and maybe a couple of power bars to sustain him. International affairs today continue to reveal shifting power dynamics from one group to another. Libya is under new leadership today, the first step toward independence. Long ago, God’s chosen people took a first step toward independence.

² Luke 2:8-9

³ John 20:1-2

⁴ Kristof, Nicholas D., “Thank You, America!” from *New York Times* Op-Ed Section, Thursday, September 1, 2011, p.A23.

Just think of all the unexpected events in history that have come to pass in our experience; the tearing down of the Berlin Wall; the dissolution of the USSR and freedom of many states like Lithuania and the Czech Republic... the defeat of Germany and Japan in WWII... the success of the American Revolution, to name a few. New births come to nations all the time. Years of struggle finally give way to new freedoms. It happened in Poland, in South Africa, and it happened for Israel.

I'm not talking about the recent establishment of the State of Israel. I'm talking about the Exodus from Egypt long ago. I'm talking about the Passover, remembered each year by the Jewish community and enacted in a ritualistic meal that reminds them of their heritage, their communal bonds, and their faith in God. It was when they were powerless to do anything about their own circumstances that God intervened to liberate them from slavery, providing freedom and self-determination. But it was also liberation for a new way of living, dependent upon God, living by God's commands, trusting in the faithfulness of the liberating God.

A ritualistic meal, the Passover, marks the beginning of that new life. It is central to the Jewish faith. Like the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur is one of the high holy days of the year. Instructed to dine on unleavened bread and carefully grilled lamb, dressed in their traveling clothes, they were to share a meal. There was no time even for the bread to rise. This is the first record of "fast food" in the Bible.

Jesus later redefines the Passover meal (the Seder) when in the upper room he takes the bread and says to his disciples, "This is my body broken for you. Take eat! Do this in remembrance of me." Communion, the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist that we celebrate today looks back and remembers the Passover meal. But this meal also looks forward to a heavenly banquet in the future, when we will dine with Christ. Christ came to be known as the "lamb of God," who takes away the sin of the world.

God is moving history (yours and mine) towards redemption, and continues to intercede for those who are powerless and enslaved by circumstances beyond their control. So what enslaves you today? What new freedom do you seek from the Lord? God sets us free from the past so that we are freed up for better living, for moral engagement in the world, for assisting others who are powerless and in need.

The belief that God is active in the world does not leave us passive, but in fact has motivated people of the Lord throughout the centuries to active participation in bringing about the transformation that God intends. Even though they experienced sacrifice, struggle, and even persecution for their efforts, they believed and took up the cause as their own. That cause came into sharpest focus in the person and work of Jesus Christ. In and through Christ there is a new way of living in the world, and a new bread of heaven to nourish the faithful.

A new school year is upon us. You may find yourself starting over today in some dimension of your life. You may be struggling with some dark night of the soul. God does some amazing things under the cover of darkness! It may be you are looking for a new job, or a new church. You may be a new parent. You may be starting a life together with someone you love, or learning to live alone again after losing someone you loved. You may be turning bitter inside because of something that happened to you, or you may be finally healing after a long and painful sojourn through a desert experience. We don't get to choose everything that happens to us but we can choose how we will respond to what happens; whether we will rise and start over or whether we will be forever at the mercy of things beyond our control.

We can and must choose finally what (or whom) we will serve! Will we serve our own appetites and ambitions? Will we forever live trying to please everyone around us? Will we sacrifice our families on the altar of success and wealth? Have we yet learned the lesson of the Children of God; to put our trust and confidence in the Lord?

What we live for matters! What we give ourselves to matters! We get to choose that! We get to choose what we are going to worship in life and what is going to gain our ultimate allegiance; what is going to define us above everything else. By God's grace, we get to begin again, learning to live with our Lord and with one another rather than against both. We can worship the God who has saved and redeemed our lives from the disasters that they might have been, and almost were. We get to start again.

This week I had my annual physical. To determine my inner health, there are two important indicators the doctor wants to check, my pulse (heart rate) and my blood pressure. They tell a great deal about what is going on in my heart. In matters of faith there are two important indicators of what is going on in our heart of hearts.

How we spend our time and how we spend our money say a great deal about what ultimately has our allegiance. If you look at your indicators and don't like what you see, maybe it is time for you to make a renewed commitment to your faith. Commit yourself anew here at this table this morning, to worship regularly and to live as the Lord directs you. By God's grace, we get to leave the slavery of the past and venture on to freedom.

We begin each new month in worship with this spiritual meal in celebration and thanksgiving for what the Lord provides; for every safe crossing of the span between where we have been and what we shall be in the future. This meal provides energy for the inner life. This meal will re-hydrate your soul. So come and enjoy what the Lord has prepared.

“Do not fear; for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine . . . ,”⁵ says the Lord. Let us prepare our hearts to receive the Sacrament. Amen

⁵ Isaiah 43:1-4