

“Getting Ready for a New Beginning”

Sermon by Lisa Crismore

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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 houses in which they eat it. 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 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. 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.

Our staff at John Knox on August 1st of this year did something that was fun and really had nothing to do with the business of the church. We went to The Escape Room, which is a place that locks a group of people in a room. The group is given a mystery to solve which can be accomplished by searching the room for clues. One clue would lead to another clue. The key that we soon discovered was that we had to follow the directions because it may hinder unlocking a lock or a door. With a few minutes to spare, our deadline arrived and we were able to escape. We had a wonderful guide who was very helpful in giving us hints along the way. It was interesting how everyone on our team took part in helping solve the clues and working together. It was a lot of fun and I appreciate the staff's willingness to do it, as it was my idea. I know that is NOT a surprise. I wanted us to do something that would bring us closer together.

Today, we find our text taking us to Egypt, where God's people are locked in the bonds of slavery. They have been crying and praying to God to escape from the rule of Pharaoh. This is not a simple group bonding exercise but what is about to happen to God's people will bring them closer together forever.

Moses has been sent by God to set the slaves free. Egypt has suffered from 9 plagues and Pharaoh has not given up. This 10th plague, which God is about to inflict on Egypt, will bring Pharaoh to the breaking point. God's people are about to have a new beginning. We hear from scripture that “This is the first month of the new year.”

This 10th plague will be devastating as it will kill all the first born: children, adults and the animals. God will save the Israelites. If you have watched the movie, “The Ten Commandments”, you have seen them take blood from a lamb and put it on their doorposts. They are also to paint the blood on the lintel of the houses, which is the beam that is supported by the doorposts. God will certainly protect them as we hear God say, “I will pass over you. No plague will destroy you.

It is the other details of the instructions, which fascinate me in this text. God's Word uses 9 verses to explain how God wants the people to handle the sacrificial lamb. They must find a year-old lamb either from a sheep or a goat without a blemish. All the lambs are to be killed at twilight as this is a community event. It is to be cut into as many pieces as there are for people to eat it. No one will be left out! If one lamb is too much then they are to go to their nearest neighbor to eat with them and share it. This sacred meal should have no leftovers. If so, they are to burn them.

Then, there is the directions on what to wear when you are eating it. You are to have your loins girded. What did that mean? Your pants were to be tightened. You needed to have your sandals on their feet, staff in hand and eat it in haste! This was it! They were going to be free. The time had come. The past would be behind them and a new beginning was ahead of them.

This event is the first Passover and it was to be celebrated for generations to come. God wanted them to remember this. How do we remember things? We remember by doing things over, and over, and over again. Every year, the Jewish people gather around a table and celebrate Passover by eating the Seder meal. Everything in that meal connects them back to the story in Exodus. They remember by tasting and hearing the telling of the story of how God heard their cries and answered their prayers. They celebrate their new beginning. And, I am sure as they gather around the table they also tell family stories as well.

We, as Christians, celebrate a very similar meal, which came from Passover. It was Jesus, who being Jewish, sat down to celebrate the Passover meal with his disciples. It was his last supper with his closest friends. After they were finished with the meal, he took bread and juice and he said this is a new promise that I make with you. This bread and this cup are my body given to you so that you are set free from your sins. Whenever you drink or eat, remember me. We do this over, and over, and over again so that we remember Christ. We remember Christ. The lamb, who had no blemish, was sacrificed so that we could be free. This freedom from our sin gives us a new beginning.

We celebrated Holy Communion last Sunday. And at first, I was wishing this text in the lectionary would have fallen on a Communion Sunday. And then, the more I thought about this text selection I began to wonder why isn't it an offering for Holy Week which leads up to Easter. Wouldn't that be the likely spot for it? Pastors have 4 choices to pick from in the lectionary. We don't have to pick from there but many do. Today's scripture is one of the lectionary choices. We find it not in Advent, Christmas, Lent or Easter but we find it smack dab in the middle of what we call "Ordinary Time".

Perhaps that is where it should be. A place to break the rhythm of our day-to-day tempo to say stop and pay attention. This meal that we share with each other (we don't do it by ourselves) is special. We should not just go through the motions but be reminded that this meal is a sacred gift from God. Are there special Communion stories that you remember?

For me, it was when I was at Hanover. The word had gotten around campus that the Methodist minister, who was a young guy, was going to be at the chapel at 9pm. We were going into finals right before Christmas break and he wanted to serve us Communion. On that night in a candle lit room, we took a French loaf of bread and some Welch's grape juice and shared it together. There were only 10 or 15 of us. I don't remember all the details. I just remember thinking this is a special way to end this part of the school year and begin preparing for Christmas, the birth of our Savior.

The other time that came to mind was when we were celebrating Maundy Thursday service in this sanctuary. It was the first time that we had the table on the floor in the sanctuary. People were invited to come up and sit to share in the meal like the disciples did in the upper room. There was a person who received the bread and the cup that night with tears streaming down their face. I

don't know why they were crying. It made me realize that this space is a safe place for people to come. This meal gives people hope.

What are your stories that come to mind at this table? There is so much destruction and brokenness going on in our world right now. Our lives are consumed by words like Hurricane Harvey, Hurricane Irma, Earthquake, Immigration Concerns, DACA, Cancer, Surgery, Illness, Hurt, Despair, Treatment, Recovery, Medical Tests, Depression, Procedure, Fear and it goes on and on. It can truly be overwhelming.

What are our stories that come to mind when we come to this table over, and over, and over again? How have you found renewal and strength for the journey? God has taken care of our past. What new life will God grant in the future? Thanks be to God for Jesus Christ who gives us new beginnings. And the people of God say, "Amen."