Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Exodus 12:1-14

Sunday September 6, 2020

***St. James Episcopal Church, Louisa, Virginia***

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**The Importance of Remembrance**

Today is a day that marks beginnings. Today is my first Sunday that I come to you as your Priest-in-Charge here at St. James Louisa.

I am excited to be here and I want you to know that I feel called to serve you. I am here for you. I do believe that God has brought us together.

The Old Testament text today is from the Book of Exodus. Exodus is a great book, the second in the Biblical narrative.

The Book of Genesis shares with us how we got here, shows us the beginnings of God’s working in the world. I used to teach Bible history, and I used to summarize the book of Genesis by saying, Creation, Fall, Flood, Tower of Babel. Genesis 1-11. Genesis 12-50, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph. If you can remember those things you can teach the Book of Genesis. So Genesis ends, and you remember the story, Joseph and the people are in slavery in Egypt.

So Exodus begins and there are three main characters in Exodus that you need to know: Pharaoh, Moses, and Yahweh.

In Exodus 1-3, the narrative is focused on the Israelites struggle with Pharaoh.  In an effort to make Pharaoh “let my people go”, God, through Moses, displayed His mighty power with nine plagues.  Pharaoh had been stubborn, hardhearted, to the bitter end (11:9-10), (which for him was about to come).

But before God forces Pharaoh to free his “first born” by taking Pharaoh’s first born, we have this pause in the narrative where God ordains the Feast of the Passover before the actual Passover actually happens.

Ritual interrupts narrative. The importance of ritual is brought into people’s consciousness.

The significance of this annual feast and the event it celebrates is highlighted by the fact that God reorients Israel’s entire calendar around Passover.

In the ancient Near East, all calendars were based on the cycle of nature, so that the new year began with the new season of growth in nature.

Here, God refocuses Israel’s calendar not on nature or creation, but on grace or redemption.

“The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: This month shall mark for you the beginning of months…” (Exodus 12:1)

Israel must count their days according to the mighty acts of God.  The new year began in the month when God delivered his people from bondage in Egypt.  To remind them that their new life began when God passed over them as he passed through Egypt, God gave them this Passover celebration in the first month of their new calendar.  While Israel also celebrated the cycle of nature along with their pagan neighbors, God wanted to make sure they never forgot that they owed their lives to the redemptive action of their God.

God gave them very detailed instructions for the Passover feast.  They focused primarily, but not solely on a lamb. On the tenth day of that first month, the head of each family was to select a lamb (or goat, vs 5) from the family’s flock.  It was essential that each family have access to a lamb, so if a family was too poor to spare a lamb, a neighboring family was to share their lamb with the poor.  The family head was to consult with the family cooks to make sure that the lamb would provide enough meat for everyone in the family.  The lamb must be a year old and totally perfect, with “no defect.”  The selected lambs must be given special care until the fourteenth day of the first month.

Then, at twilight of that day, each lamb must be slaughtered.  The blood had to be caught and then smeared on the sides and top of the doorframes of the homes where they ate the lamb.  The consumption of that lamb had to follow strict guidelines.  The same night the lambs were slaughtered the people were to eat the meat.  The lamb had to be roasted whole, rather than butchered and boiled in water.  The main course had to be accompanied with bitter herbs and bread made without yeast.  Whatever was not consumed had to be burned to ashes before morning.  And Israel was to eat this feast in a hurry, like they were late for a trip, which, of course, they were.  They were to eat “with their loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. And you shall eat it hurriedly”

The reasons for some of these directions seem to appear clearer to us looking backwards. The focus on a lamb was a divine foreshadowing of the Lamb whose blood would take away the sins of the world.  Thus, it must be without spot or blemish, absolute perfect.  The lamb was roasted whole because that’s how wandering shepherds prepared their lambs out in the wild, where God’s wandering people would spend the next 40 years.  The bitters herbs were a perpetual reminder of Israel’s bitter servitude in Egypt.  The unleavened bread was a reminder of the haste with which Israel had to leave Egypt, after a 400 year wait and before Pharaoh changed his mind.  The peculiar state of dress of the Israelites pointed in that same direction; remember how you had to flee for your life as fast as you could.

But the central meaning of the lamb and all the accompanying details is found in those last words of verse 11.  “It is the passover of the Lord”

This feast and its annual celebration pointed to Yahweh and what he did that fateful night.  “On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every first born—both men and animals—and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt.  I am Yahweh.”  That’s what this whole struggle with Pharaoh was about—who is God, who is sovereign, who controls the life of Israel?  Is it the gods of Egypt who seem to have prevailed for over 400 years?  Or is it Yahweh, who has systematically demonstrated his power over those gods in the Ten Plagues, ending with the ruination of the house of the god Pharaoh?

When Yahweh sets his people free, he gives Israel a sign to remind them for all time that he and he alone is their only Savior—that blood on their doorframes, the blood of the lamb that marks them as the saved.  It was a sign for them and, apparently, a sign for God; “when I see the blood, I will pass over you.  No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt.”  All of the peculiar rules for the Passover feast were designed to remind Israel that Yahweh is their God and Savior who passed over them because of the blood of a lamb.

And, says verse 14, This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. “You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations…” so that the succeeding generations don’t forget their liberating God.  Sadly, Israel did forget their God when they stopped celebrating Passover.  But that is another story for another day.

Passover is a uniquely Jewish feast, but it reminds of several applicable things.

  First, this passage shows us the centrality of worship for the maintenance of an historical community, and it demonstrates the importance of doing worship in the right way.  This festival for Israel was at the heart of the way they marked time, the way they identified themselves, and the way they related to God.

We as Episcopalians have an edge on this I believe. We are a people of the calendar - our liturgy, how we worship defines who we are. We do things orderly and with a purpose. We are a people of the calendar. The liturgical calendar guides our years and how we think.

It was important then, as it is now, not only that they kept the festival, but also that they kept it properly.  Every detail meant something.

We have seen the importance of corporate worship in this time of pandemic and we have felt its absence. The importance of our ritual of worship, celebrating Eucharist together, meeting together in our community has impacted our hearts and our lives.

As I pondered the detailed instructions for the celebration of the Passover feast, I wondered if there was any message in that for the way we worship today.  Much of the church has embraced a casual, spontaneous, informal worship in the name of authenticity.  That concern for heartfelt worship is laudable.  It is, of course, very possible to dwell so much on rules and forms that worship is robbed of its heart.  And it is possible that formal ritualistic worship can become a substitute for real life engagement.

Think of God’s harsh words through Isaiah about the kind of feasts and fasts that make God sick and angry, because his people don’t engage in care for the poor and oppressed.

God rearranged the Jewish calendar so that the year began with Passover.

God was saying, remember that your life began when I saved you from bondage.  I am the source of your life.

For us, our liturgical year, our first season of the year begins the fourth Sunday before Christmas and continues through Christmas Eve. Advent as we refer to it, comes from the Latin word *adventus*, which means “arrival” or “coming”. It is a time of preparation and of expectation - of preparing ourselves for Christ’s coming

Commemoration days are important. Today begins my first day with you, marks the first Sunday of my time with St. James.

We mark our days by significant events and things that need to be remembered. This is the day I graduated college, got my first job, got married, lost my loved one, stopped my addiction.

There is a society-wide tendency to think that we establish our life by the choices we make.  You can be whoever you decide to be.  There may be some truth in this, but Passover points to marking our lives and making our deciding factors be more about God and what God has done for us, then the decisions we seemingly make. And it may be that a key to our spiritual health is for us to mark our days more by God’s days and what God has done, then by reflecting just on ourselves and what we are going through.

Jesus established the Eucharist at the Passover feast.  He was very deliberately saying that God was doing in and through him, what God had done in Egypt long ago.  The New Testament calls Jesus the spotless Lamb of God whose blood marks us, sets us free, and cleanses us from all sin.

1 Corinthians 5:7 refers to “Christ our Passover, who was sacrificed for us.”

I do not need to stress the importance of the Eucharist to you -we have all felt its loss dearly in the past few months. The Last Supper becomes the First Supper in a real sense in the Gospels and it is in the Eucharist that we are reminded each week, “this is my Blood of the new Covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink it, do this for the remembrance of me.” We celebrate to remember. To be reminded. We mark the day.

So today let us be reminded as we leave of the importance of marking days. The importance of remembrance.

Today is a significant day in the history of St. James. You have called a new Priest to serve you. We will grow and live together. We will be family and community. And I will continually point us all to the remembrance of why were are here. Amen.