

It's the biggest holiday of the Jewish year. To us, it would be like combining Christmas and Easter with the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. It's a huge celebration of religious and ethnic identity. It is the feast of Passover.

The Passover has great meaning for Christians as well. Both our worship and our faith are firmly grounded in the Passover. Theologically and liturgically we are rooted in this great Jewish celebration. So I want to spend some time with it this morning.

Our OT lesson from the 12th chapter of Exodus speaks about the first Passover. And it speaks of the first Passover meal. The Passover meal is still the most important meal of the Jewish year. For Jews, the Passover meal is the yearly reminder that God acted on Israel's behalf and brought them out of slavery.

Last week, we heard that God's call to Moses from the burning bush. Moses went back to Egypt, but Pharaoh would not let the Hebrew people go. So God sent a series of plagues, 10 in all. The first 9 plagues involved natural disaster: turning the Nile into blood, lots of frogs, gnats, and lice, anthrax, hail, locusts, and darkness.

But the 10<sup>th</sup> plague would be worst of all. After the 10<sup>th</sup> plague, God told Moses that Pharaoh would indeed let the Hebrew slaves go. The 10<sup>th</sup> plague would be the death of all of the Egyptian firstborn.

In preparation for that plague, and in preparation for the freedom that would follow, God instructs the people to prepare the first Passover meal. Thus the meal is eaten in the context of both tragedy and triumph, of both death and deliverance.

Exodus 12 lays down the rules and regulations for how the meal is to be eaten. And if you look at Exodus 12, the thing that jumps out first and foremost is the importance of the lamb and the lamb's blood. The lamb is the central image of ch12.

Here's what Exodus says about the lamb:

Every household needs a lamb.

If a household is too small, they are to join with their neighbors in obtaining a lamb.

The lamb is to be without blemish. In other words, it is to be perfect. It is to be the best lamb that can be offered. It's also supposed to be a year-old male. That means a lamb just beginning the prime of its life.

It is to be slaughtered at twilight.

It is to be cooked and eaten in a certain way. There are to be no leftovers.

It is to be eaten hurriedly. You are to eat it dressed for travel. The flesh of the lamb will be food for the upcoming journey.

Some of its blood is to be painted on the doorways, on the two vertical posts, and on the horizontal lintel. It is this blood of the lamb that will be the sign of protection. When the death comes to the firstborn in Egypt, God promises to pass over the houses marked with the lamb's blood. They will not be destroyed. The blood will provide safety.

During the first Passover in Egypt, it is by eating the flesh of a lamb and by spreading its blood on the doorposts that the Children of Israel are saved. The flesh and blood of the unblemished lamb saves them from death, and brings them into a new life of freedom.

For Christians, the most important meal that we share has its theological roots in the Passover meal. For Christians, salvation also comes through partaking of the flesh of a lamb and through the lamb's blood. In this case, however, it is Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, who brings us salvation.

Jesus as the perfect Lamb of God is a strong Biblical image.

The Passover lamb was originally supposed to be the best that people had to offer God.

In Jesus, God offers us his best, his unblemished, perfect, and sinless Lamb.

Jesus, the new Paschal Lamb, provides spiritual nourishment and sustenance for his people through the sacrament of his body and blood. He brings freedom and deliverance from the powers of sin and death.

Now Holy Communion is rich with symbolism and many levels and layers of meaning. But one very essential core meaning is partaking of the Lamb of God's body and blood.

Now this can possibly throw us for a loop. Partaking of Jesus' flesh and blood. Sounds like cannibalism. Sounds like a zombie movie.

But the context is hugely important. Understanding the ancient understandings of blood and flesh is important.

First blood. Blood was thought to be life. Good Jews wouldn't even eat animal meat with any blood in it. It's was regarded too special and too mystical. Blood was the essence of life itself. And this view makes a certain amount of sense. If you bleed too much, you lose life. Today if you lose blood, doctors try to put blood back in through a transfusion.

To drink blood therefore is to drink life. To drink of Jesus' blood, to share in the Blood of the Lamb is to partake of Jesus' life. Jesus life is taken into our bodies and made part of us. Jesus says, "Those who drink my blood have eternal life."<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> John 6:54

Partaking of Jesus' flesh also carries powerful symbolic meaning. Back in his time, after an animal sacrifice, the flesh of the sacrificed animal was often eaten. The pagans during Jesus' time believed that the flesh of the sacrificed animal mystically became a part of the body of the god it was sacrificed to. To eat the flesh of an animal sacrifice was to eat a part of a god. And they believed firmly, "You are what you eat." Therefore to eat the flesh of the Lamb of God, sacrificed on the cross, is to partake of that sacrifice, and find oneness with God himself. Jesus says, "Those who eat my flesh abide in me, and I in them."<sup>2</sup>

The bread broken and shared is Christ's broken body. The wine that is shared is Christ's blood poured out for us. And the reason we can share in these sacred mysteries today is because Jesus passed over from death to life.

Like the blood of the Passover lamb, the blood of Jesus provides safety. In fact it provides the only real safety there is. The blood of Jesus shed on the cross is the only thing that can save us from the power of sin and death.

Originally, the blood of the Passover lamb painted on their door posts saved the people of Israel from death.

And it is the blood of the lamb of God painted on the wood of the cross that saves us from the death as well.

Also, the flesh of the Passover lamb provided food for the journey. The Passover was a meal which prepared the people to embark on a journey out of Egypt, through the wilderness, and into the Promised Land.

We are fed with Jesus' living body. His life can give us life for our journeys, until that day when we are brought into the Promised Land that is prepared for those who love him.

We come to Jesus' table and we are fed. We are not fed in some abstract way. Instead, we share concrete and tangible signs of our Lord's presence with us: a piece of broken bread, in a cup of poured wine. Jesus saves us from death. He gives us food for our journey.

In Exodus, it was the blood of the sacrificed lamb that saved the people during the first Passover. On the cross, it is the blood of the sacrificed Lamb of God that saves us, then, now, and for all time.

What we do in Eucharist is an incredible mystery. Ordinary bread and wine are spiritually transformed into the body and blood of Christ.

In the sacrament of the Eucharist, what is ordinary becomes extraordinary, so that we, ordinary humans, might share in the extraordinary new life of God's grace. "Do this," Jesus says, "in remembrance of me."

---

<sup>2</sup> John 6:56

The whole thing is mind boggling. It strains our understanding past the breaking point. Broken bread becomes a broken body. Wine poured into a cup becomes blood poured out on our behalf.

We can't really understand why we are commanded to eat this meal. It's probably not a meal any of us would have chosen to ask for. All we can do, is put out our hands, partake, and say, "Thank you. I don't understand it fully, but thank you."

Jesus says "Do it," and we do it. Week after week we do it. Year after year, decade after decade we do it. We come to God's table, and we are fed.

The mystery of the Eucharist is not something we fully understand or comprehend. It is something we do. Our Lord says, 'Bring your lives and your hearts to my table. This is your Passover meal. Take, bless, break, and give the bread and wine. And as you do so, take, bless, break and give the substance of your own lives. And I will feed you with my own life. I will change you. So come to my table. And be changed.'

My flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed, says the Lord. Happy are those who are called to the Supper of the Lamb.