

SERMON TITLE: "Passover Storytelling"
SERMON TEXTS: Exodus 12, Matthew 26, Ezra 6:19-22; and Joshua 1-5
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: April 9, 2020 (Maundy Thursday) at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

With the reminder from the scriptures that Steve read for us, most of us are fairly well aware that the origins of tonight's celebration go all the way back to the Old Testament story of Exodus. For Christians reflecting on Jesus' Last Supper, this is Maundy Thursday, the night Jesus gave the commandment that his disciples are to love one another. This is Holy Thursday, so named because this is our Christian Holy Week that begins with Palm Sunday, includes the crucifixion of Jesus on Good Friday, and comes to its glorious climax with the resurrection on Easter Sunday morning. But for Jesus and his Jewish disciples gathered in that upper room, it was the time of Passover, the time of Passover storytelling.

THE PASSOVER STORY OF EXODUS

Jesus and his disciples, like Jews before and after them, were commemorating that important event, approximately 1500 years before Christ, when God used the leadership of Moses to break the Hebrew people free from slavery in Egypt. Jesus and his disciples were recalling how God had instructed them to slaughter a lamb and smear its blood over their doorposts so the plague would "pass over" them and not cause any death in their families, while they were closed up inside their houses. They were to eat that lamb with unleavened bread because they were in a hurry and didn't have time for yeast to rise. They were to eat their Passover dinner with their traveling clothes and sandals on so they would be ready to leave Egypt in haste. Having eaten this important dinner, they would then be ready to move out quickly when death and its dangers had passed over and the all-clear signal was given.

Year after year and century after century since the Jews were liberated from Egypt, they have reminded themselves of this origin story. Gathered around tables with family and friends, they have

retold the events of that first Passover when God rescued them from slavery, the plague of death, and Pharaoh's army. So, when we think of Jesus and his Last Supper with his disciples, it's good for us to imagine what that first Passover would have meant to them as they applied it to their own time of Roman oppression.

THE PASSOVER STORY OF EZRA

But the first Passover event recalled in the Book of Exodus isn't the only Passover story which Jesus and his disciples might have recalled on that Last Supper night. For example, they might have retold the story of the Passover that's found in the book of Ezra. There, in chapter six, we read that the Jews celebrated the Passover after they had returned from exile in Babylon. After the Persians rose to power, King Cyrus had decreed that the Jews could return to their homeland and rebuild the city of Jerusalem, their homes, and the temple. Ezra and others did exactly that. And, after they had dedicated the newly rebuilt temple, the time of Passover came on the 14th day of the first month. The priests and Levites had purified themselves so they would be ritually clean. Then they killed the Passover lambs, so that all the returned exiles could eat. As Ezra 6:22 tells us, "With joy they celebrated the festival of unleavened bread [for] seven days; for the Lord had made them joyful, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, so that he aided them in the work on the house of God, the God of Israel." So, not only was Passover a time to escape bondage in Egypt, Passover was also a time to celebrate the hopes of a restored kingdom of God and its rituals of faith.

THE PASSOVER STORY OF JOSHUA

In my reading of the Old Testament, I came across another story of a Passover celebration. This one is in the book of Joshua. You may recall that the story of Joshua begins at the end of the 40-year wilderness wandering. After the first Passover, Moses had led his people to freedom through the Red Sea. Then, for 40 years, they squabbled and sinned and had to work through many difficulties. They

received the laws from God and learned to live by them. Finally, a whole generation had passed away, including Moses, and now Joshua was leading with his vision of entering into the Promised Land.

It's interesting to read this story with the first Passover in mind. The first thing Joshua did was send spies ahead, who gained the help of a woman named Rahab. Because they appreciated her assistance, the Jewish spies told her that, when they returned as invaders, she must tie a crimson cord in her upstairs window. Like the blood smeared over the door frames 40 years earlier in Egypt, this crimson window cord would protect her family secured inside her house. If any of her relatives went out into the street during the invasion, however, they would be responsible for their own deaths.

After the spies returned and reported, Joshua led the Hebrew people across the Jordan River. It was an elaborate undertaking. The priests carried the Ark of the Covenant. When they stepped into the Jordan River—even though it was a flood stage—the river stopped flowing. Just like God had done for the previous generation at the Red Sea, God again allowed the Jews to cross over on dry ground. Then, after some ritual purification and healing—on the plains of Jericho, on the 14th day of the month, while the Israelites were camped at Gilgal—they celebrated the Passover.

THE PASSOVER STORY OF JESUS

Cross over, pass over. Passover, cross over. I don't know how those words sound in Hebrew or Aramaic, but in English we get a nuance of meaning there that sounds like what Jesus might have been thinking. When he went up to Jerusalem, he knew he was headed for the cross. As he was there in that upper room, washing feet, teaching one last time about the meaning of discipleship, blessing bread and wine, and talking about his body and his blood poured out for many—Jesus was about to pass over from life to death, to cross over from mortality to immortality. This is the Passover story that has captured the minds and hearts of Christians for 2000 years. This is the story we love to tell. This is the story that gives us life.

OUR OWN CORONAVIRUS PASSOVER STORY

But can you also imagine how, in years to come, we will tell our own version of this Passover story? We will tell our children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren how we had to stay in our houses while the virus passed over, so that we wouldn't be killed. We had to close down our churches and schools and businesses. We had to purify ourselves by using sanitizer, disinfecting wipes, and washing our hands while singing Happy Birthday twice. We had to self-isolate for 14 days if we had travelled anywhere or if we might have been exposed. We had to buy toilet paper, wear masks, and postpone non-emergency surgeries. We had to hold classes and meetings by Zoom and lead worship services by Facebook Live—even on Easter Sunday! We had to do all these things in order for COVID-19 to pass over our state, to pass over our country, and to pass over our world. We had to connect with our spiritual roots and trust God in order to cross over safely to the other side.

As we read from Exodus 12, the celebration of Passover was meant to be a “perpetual ordinance,” an annual observation—no matter what else was going on. Whether the people of God were suffering in slavery and needing to be freed, celebrating a rebuilt city and temple, crossing a flood-stage river into a new promised land, facing the imminent arrest and death of their teacher and savior, or trying to survive the coronavirus—no matter what is happening, the people of God remember God's power to overcome evil. In the face of oppression, opportunity, danger, and death, we remember God's power to offer us salvation and life. We remember, and we tell our children and our grandchildren. On this night, we commit ourselves to Passover storytelling.