

Exodus 12:1-14 “Deep Roots”

We're in week three of the story of Moses and the Exodus of God's people from Egypt. We've talked about Moses' birth and all the brave women who set the stage for the greatest story in Israel's history. Last week we talked about God calling Moses and Moses coming to the realization that it's not all about him. So far, I think, we've been able to relate to the story pretty well. We know brave women and men who have spoken to power and launched revolutionary events. A lot of us have been in positions where we've felt a calling to do something that seems overwhelming, but when we work through our fears and insecurities we're able to see where we occupy a place in God's story. So far so good with the Exodus story, right? And this week, we're slaughtering lambs and painting our doorposts with their blood so that God doesn't kill all the firstborn in the land. How did we go from cute little baby Moses in a basket to death and destruction?

Well, to catch you up -- After God called Moses, he returned to Egypt, which was pretty gutsy on his part considering he fled Egypt because both the Egyptians *and* the Hebrew slaves wanted to kill him. But now he has God backing him up as well as his brother Aaron. And they've got, for lack of a better term, divinely gifted super-powers to show Pharaoh that they, as representatives of God, mean business. So they meet Pharaoh and demand that he release the Hebrew slaves from Egypt. Pharaoh doesn't want anything to do with this because why would he get rid of all this free labor. This is where things get freaky. God tells Moses and Aaron to inform Pharaoh that if he doesn't release the Hebrews, Egypt is going to be on the receiving end of some deadly plagues. That is, unless Pharaoh complies with this demand. Then the story goes into detail about the effects of nine of these plagues. For plague number one, all the fresh water in Egypt was turned to blood. That meant no drinking water. But Pharaoh wouldn't budge. Then there were frogs and gnats and flies. I would have sent the gnats and flies first and said, "Oh, you don't like these flies? How about some frogs to eat them up!" But I'm not God. And that didn't move Pharaoh to action

either. Then the livestock in the land became diseased. Then there were festering boils. Thunder and hail was next. Then locusts. Then darkness. None of these things moved Pharaoh. He wasn't going to let the Hebrews go. So God told Moses to give Pharaoh details about what to expect from plague number ten. "Tell him that I will pass through Egypt and that every first born human and animal in the land will die."

And that's where we are this week. This is where a lot of people start experiencing some disconnect with the story. Remember last week when I was talking about how some people's perception of God is skewed because they define God by what God is against rather than what God is for? This usually starts when folks read stories in the Bible about God destroying and smiting and killing people because they aren't doing what God thinks they ought to be doing. That's an oversimplification, of course, but hey ... that's what we do when we read stories like this. We aren't willing to take the time to learn much about the "why" of the story, so we just take the first thing that comes to our mind when we read and run with it. "Oh, the point of this story is that when we do bad things, God is going to smite us!" So it's not too terribly surprising when you hear some of these high-profile TV preachers weighing in about why we've had so many natural disasters lately. If you've got it in your mind that bad things happen because God is angry, you're definitely going to be feeling disconnected this week. Especially when you think, "But what in the world have we done ... *what have I done* to deserve this?" Folks ... hurricanes are caused by cold, low pressure systems forming over warm oceans. The warmer the ocean, the more moisture builds up thus making the storms more powerful. Forest fires are caused when lightning strikes dry, combustible vegetation during hot, windy weather conditions. *Or ...* in the case of the Eagle Creek fire up in Oregon, when foolish humans aren't careful with open flames and fireworks during hot, windy weather conditions. Earthquakes are caused, for the most part, by natural shifts in the earth's tectonic plates. Maybe not so much in Oklahoma, but that's another issue. And yet, I read news reports and have watched footage of preachers blaming Hurricane Harvey on the city of Houston

for electing a gay mayor back in 2010. What the heck? She's been out of office for 8 months! God was running a little late on that one I guess. Maybe it's because God got behind schedule because God was busy flooding people in India last month for being ... *Hindu* or whatever. So many sins, so little time! Folks, these disasters occur because stuff ... just ... happens. Some of it may very well be our fault, but not because we've made divorce too easy or that liquor stores are open on Sundays. Maybe it's because we've been lousy stewards of the world God has given us!

So unfortunately, when we read something like the story of the plagues of Egypt in the Bible, that circuit that keeps our minds and hearts connected and engaged with Holy Scripture shorts out and we shut down. *That's* where the disconnect happens. And it sometimes stays that way unless ... we make the effort to explore and learn what the story is about and why it's so important for three major world religions. See, God's desire is *not* for us to be disconnected. The whole point of these amazing accounts and epic stories woven together in this collection we call the Bible is to show the history of people's connection to God. We have this book so that we can *find* points of connection.

So ... plagues. Lamb's blood. Doorposts. Passover. What are we looking at here? In this story that seems like it's about life-taking, what is the life-giving, life-affirming message we can take home? Let's set the terror of the plagues aside for now and look at what this event means to our Jewish brothers and sisters today. Remember ... this is their defining story in the same way that Christ's resurrection is ours.

What Barbara read is the story of the night of the Hebrew people's liberation. The people of Israel were told to gather in their households and cook a lamb without blemish or defect. They were to eat this lamb, along with unleavened bread and bitter herbs, in readiness for their escape from Egypt. They were to eat the meal with their traveling clothes on and their bags packed. And they were to spread the blood of the slaughtered lamb on the doorposts of the house, so that when the

Lord came to overthrow the gods of Egypt, God would just pass over that house. Today when Jews eat their Passover meal, they do so with a great sense of thankfulness for God's mercy. The slaughtered lamb is understood to symbolize an offering for Israel's sin. The herbs remind them of their terrible suffering under Pharaoh. The unleavened bread is a reminder that they had to hurry to get out of Egypt. No time to wait for dough to rise. And the wine represents the blood by which God spared their lives.

For Jews, the eating of a Passover meal is essential to their faith. It is a ritual by which they both remember their liberation, and express the hope that an even more wonderful liberation might be theirs in the future. For Jews, the Passover is a ritual which tells a story ... the story of a people and their faith. But it's also the story of each individual life that's captivated by that story. In the celebration of the Passover, individual worshippers come to see how it is that God has brought mercy and rescue *into their own lives*. And they are called and empowered to live out that liberation in their own bodies and relationships. By participating in the Passover rituals, individual worshippers learn how to leave the slavery of Egypt behind and enter into the journey towards life and hope in God's 'promised land.' The story, plagues included, sets the stage, sometimes quite dramatically, for this ritual.

Why do we have rituals? We have rituals to make sense of things that otherwise might not make sense. Fifteen years ago tomorrow, our country was on the receiving end of the greatest single act of terrorism we've ever faced. I remember how surreal it seemed when I sat with my office mates and watched both towers of the World Trade Center come down one after the other. I remember thinking, "this doesn't even seem real" when I watched part of the Pentagon burn. How did this happen? Why did this happen? I felt very disconnected. For the last 15 years, we have been in the process of establishing rituals to remember and try to make sense of this terrible day. We *need* rituals. And I believe we need rituals in our faith even more. How is one to make sense of what

happened when the people of Israel were finally able to escape Egypt unless one is able to place it within the framework of suffering, slavery, and the longing for justice?

It blows my mind sometimes when religious leaders try to use this part of the Exodus story to scare people into compliance with whatever behavior the leader wants from a congregation. Are there scary parts of the story? Yes. Frogs and locusts are scary. Is the scary stuff the point? No. Setting the stage for the ritual of celebrating God's mercy and *God's desire to deliver us from captivity* is the point.

Okay so what does this have to do with us? Sure, this is the greatest story of the *Jewish* faith, but not so much for the Christian tradition. Again, our defining story is the story of Jesus' life, death, resurrection and continued presence in the gathered body of believers that we understand as the church. Our Jewish roots run deep though. Remember, Jesus was Jewish. (No he wasn't Jesse, he was Christian!) No. Just ... think about that one. Jesus was a practicing Jew. What ritual do we observe to commemorate our understanding of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ? Communion. Or "The Lord's Supper." When Jesus shared that last meal with his twelve closest disciples, what sort of meal was it? It was a Passover meal. Lamb. Bitter herbs. Unleavened bread. Wine. Jesus used this ancient, foundational Jewish ritual to illustrate how his life, death and resurrection pointed to God's mercy and forgiveness too. The lamb and bitter herbs still hold the traditional meaning in the Passover ritual. But that bread and cup? That's where we who follow Christ connect in a different way. Jesus told his disciples that the bread and the cup stood for his broken body and his shed blood. For what? For the remission of sins ... a sign of God's love and God's mercy. *That* is the connection.