

Maundy Thursday – March 29, 2018

Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. One of the things I love about big family meals is sitting around afterwards and listening to family stories. When I was a kid, one of our big family meals was Thanksgiving, which was always held at the home of my mother's aunt and uncle, with relatives from her side of the family. I'll be honest. When I was a kid, I thought all that sitting around and talking was super boring. But the older I got, the more I appreciated it. And now, well, I wish I could go back in time to those gatherings talk to all those folks again, many of whom have since died. Now I'm the one telling family stories to my children, and nieces, and nephews, but still hearing more stories from my own parents.

I realize that this is not a universal experience, that not everyone has a family that does this. But I think that it represents a universal impulse, at least, to tell and hear our stories, to connect ourselves to the past as a way of understanding who we are. Where we come from is an important part of that story. We do this as a nation to some extent. We teach our history in our schools. We commemorate our origins on the 4th of July, Independence Day. But we also do this through other holidays. On Memorial day we remember those who have died serving our country. On Labor Day we remember those who worked to make the lives of ordinary workers better. On MLK Day we remember the Civil Rights movement and our ongoing need to reform our society. Businesses do something like this too. They celebrate their anniversaries. Longevity is a badge of honor. Some even have their own museums. And of course churches commemorate the anniversaries of their founding. I helped to organize the festivities marking the 50th anniversary of Epiphany Lutheran Church down in Carbondale. We had long-term members write histories of the various periods. We brought back former pastors to preach. We watched slideshows of pictures from their time at Epiphany and heard their memories. That was 2010. And the next year, 2011, you celebrated the 100th anniversary of this congregation.

Our first reading tonight talks about the Passover, and the importance of the people of Israel commemorating it each year. That's because God's rescue of God's people from Slavery in Egypt was the foundational event in the history of Israel. Everything up to that point – Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Joseph – that is all just prehistory. It was the Passover, the deaths of the firstborn sons of Egypt and the "passing over" of the Israelite households, that was the trigger event for God's rescue operation to be put into action. To this day, the Passover is celebrated every year by our Jewish brothers and sisters, just as this passage from Exodus prescribes. The tradition is for the youngest child present to

ask “why is this night different from all other nights?” And that then becomes the cue for reciting once again the Passover story, to remember again God’s saving and constituting act for the people of Israel.

These Great Three Days that we begin tonight – Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Vigil of Easter – function in the same way for Christians. They recount the events leading up to and including Jesus’ crucifixion, the trigger event for God’s rescue operation in Jesus Christ, this time on behalf of all people. And they continue right through to Jesus resurrection by which God conquers the power of sin, death, and evil, and which is for us the founding event of the church. Tonight on Maundy Thursday we remember the meal Jesus shared with his followers before his crucifixion. We recount how at this meal Jesus enacted a new and better kind of kingship. God means to rule the world not as we attempt to rule one another, through force and fear, but through service and love. On Good Friday we remember Jesus’ arrest, trial, and crucifixion and we ponder the paradox of the savior of the world being executed by those he came to save. Finally, at the Easter Vigil, as we await Christ’s resurrection and the new creation it makes possible, we light a new fire and take its light into the church, where we recount by candlelight the stories of God’s creating and redeeming work on our behalf throughout the history of the people of Israel. In doing so we see how they prefigure God’s saving work in Jesus in in our lives of faith in the community of the church. We then remember and affirm our baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection. Just as God rescued the Israelites through the waters of the sea, so God rescues us from sin and death through the water of Holy Baptism. Then we chant the Great Litany, (what I sometimes call the “prayer for everything.”) while the room is reset for Easter, and then finally the lights come up and we sing “This is the Feast of Victory for our God” and begin the first Communion service of Easter.

These Three Days are our Passover, celebrating Christ’s passing over from death to life, his conquering the power of sin, death, and evil, and his opening the way for us to the life that God created us for and has intended for us all along. This is the story that makes us who we are as God’s people. This is the meal that makes us who we are, fed with the body of Christ to be the body of Christ, loved and forgiven by God to love and forgive one another. This is the meal that Tonight we begin the journey. May God be with us throughout these three days and throughout our lives. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Pastor Chris Repp
Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, IL