

Holy Thursday - April 14, 2022

Exodus 12: 1-14

1 Corinthians 11: 23-32

John 13: 1-17, 31-35

In the name of Jesus, the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world. Amen.

Stories are a part of the human experience. I have known a few people who were great at telling stories. Two of my favorite storytellers were teachers that I had; both of them were New York Jews who would talk about baseball as easily as they would talk about politics and religion. They knew how to tell the same story in different ways, including different details each time depending on the context. They could keep the interest of a classroom, though it was typical for student to have short attention spans. Even in our modern age, the younger generation appreciates it when the older generation takes the time to give them something real to take away. In a world consumed by and obsessed with the inane, the storyteller still has an extraordinarily important role to play.

Stories play an important role in shaping people at all points in the process of socialization. Families have their stories that should be shared with each generation. Cities have their stories that should be told. In ever expanding concentric circles, the stories that serve to make up the individual's world should be shared. The richer and deeper the stories, the more the person feels connected to something bigger than themselves, something that can transcend the intellectual and emotional void which threatens to engulf so many souls. There is something in the hearts of men which longs for a meaningful story, a story that can help them understand themselves, who they are, how they got here, where they are going, and why any of it matters. Since the ancient times, these questions were answered through stories. Political philosopher, Hannah Arendt, writing in *Men in Dark Times*, said that storytelling "reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it..." and "it brings about consent and reconciliation with things as they really are."

In many ways, the problems confronting humanity have always stemmed from the stories which have made the world into what it is. Post-Modernity, which has been with us since the first half of the 20th century, is a time bereft of deep and meaningful stories. Many foundational stories are viewed as too archaic to be useful to us now. It is a myth of the scientific revolution that intellectual and societal progress will march forward, arm and arm, toward the good. To the extent that many in the West have bought into this myth, the story has brought about a devaluation of mankind as human beings, a perversion of art into low forms of kitsch entertainment, and a careless embrace of empty causes among those with no real purpose. Much of the West is adrift, lost in a horizonless world, absent of any anchoring principles, and long removed from the stories that are so critical to our self-understanding. If there is anything in this mythical understanding of the world that can unite man it is to bring us together at the

lowest level. Nietzsche once remarked that the morning newspaper has replaced morning prayer. Part of his point was that people were learning more and more about less and less, and that all kinds of interests could be stimulated but not pursued with real passion. The constant distraction renders it impossible to focus on the few essentials that man's wholeness depends on. This distraction separates modern man from his story.

Part of the problem is we have neglected learning our own story in the church. We have allowed the distractions of life to drown out the echoes of history that resound in our hearts. That is why some Christians will offer prayers to the God of pronouns, or the God of Trans-being.¹ On the other extreme, an unquestioning orthodoxy can cause us to feel as if there is no longer a need to contemplate the beauty, mystery, and reality of God's ongoing work. Our modern minds take too much for granted; wonder has been removed, especially in contemporary Christianity. There is a tendency to treat the Bible as a document that is to be scientifically explored, submitting the text to our demands for evidence, and wrenching from the text the meanings we would like to assign. The Bible is a book written to speak to our entire being, not just the rational mind. It is a story, not a textbook.

Augustine says that, in the Bible, a few words produce a wide stream from which men can draw different truths: One draws one truth, another draws another truth from the same stream.² This is not to say that truth is relative, but that the scriptures are inexhaustible and speak different facets of the truth to people at different times. Christian theology is like a diamond that shimmers in the light differently when the angle is changed. The diamond remains unchanged, but the perspective becomes richer and appreciation for it is enhanced by curious and open examination. If it has become stale to us, the fault is our own, and we do not need the God of light and life to be "Woke" for Him to be relevant or interesting.

Tonight, we have a story to consider. Our tradition is rich and rooted in history, reaching back to ancient times, yet it is as relevant as ever. The Jews are a people that survived as a storytelling people. Jonathan Sacks, one of the leading Jewish thinkers of our day, says, "A people that never forgets its purpose and its past, that reenacts its story in every family every year, a nation that attributes its successes to God and its failures to itself cannot die. It may go into exile but it will return."³ We are grafted into that tradition by virtue of Jesus' work, and as such, we can embrace Passover as part of our faith since it is the sacred ritual which provided the framework for what we mark tonight, the institution of the Lord's Supper. It is important for us to remember what God has done for His people in history. We remember actual events, not abstract ideals. What we remember tonight is ours; it is a part of our story that shapes the world for us,

¹ Lest you think I made this up, you can find it here: <https://katyandtheword.com/2022/03/31/god-of-pronouns-a-prayer/>.

² Augustine, *Confessions* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica), 108.

³ Jonathan Sacks, *Ceremony and Celebration: Introduction to the Holidays* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2017), 246.

and it provides us a meaningful lens through which we can view the world and understand ourselves, both collectively and as individuals.

Israel, as a nation, was held captive in Egypt for generations. For generations, the people had called out to God for relief from their oppression. Each generation had not lost hope that God would fulfill His promises. After centuries of living as a people without a home in a hostile place, God delivered His people by the strength of His arm. God, knowing human nature very well, also tied the liberation of the people to a meal. From a meal, God formed the independent nation of Israel, and led them to freedom. The meal was to be repeated by Israel, year after year, generation after generation, regardless of the spiritual or political situation of the people. The people of Israel have lived this reality as they have gone through the destruction of the Temple by Babylon in 586, exile in Babylon, and their return to Israel about 150 years later under the Persian ruler, Cyrus. They rebuilt the Temple, then renovated it to a marvelous condition under Herod, only to see it destroyed again in 70 A.D. by the Romans as Jesus had predicted.⁴ When looking upon the ruins of the Temple from Mount Scopus, Rabbi Akiva asked, "Now that I have seen the realization of the prophecies of destruction, shall I not believe in the prophecies of restoration?" For nearly 1500 years, the Passover rite has ended with the words, "This is the bread of oppression our fathers ate in the land of Egypt. Let all who are hungry come in and eat; let all who are in need come and join us for the Passover. Now we are here; next year in the land of Israel. Now – Slaves; next year, we shall be free." Imagine how the context of this rite changed in 1948 with the newly formed state of Israel.

The Passover meal and the accompanying ritual that developed around it is a symbol of life and death, blood and salvation, suffering and freedom, and enduring faith in God's promises. That Jews continue to observe this ritual in such a time-tested manner is evidence of its validity as a covenant of God. That Christ repurposed the ritual, or rather fulfilled the purposes of the meal, is evidence of its grand role in human history. Moses directed Israel, a particular people, to participate in a meal of remembrance every year at Passover. Christ, in fulfilling the sacred meal, calls unto Himself a broader people from every nation, for the Kingdom of God is more expansive than the nation of Israel alone.

For the people of Israel who were observing Passover on that Spring night nearly two-thousand years ago, there was a story to tell. The purpose of the meal was to relive the events of the Exodus, but it was also a forward-looking rite. And the rite was to teach the people important lessons through the story that was told. In most households, it was a father or grandfather who would tell the story of the Passover and the Exodus. They would recount the stories of life and death, removing a few drops from the cup of

⁴Interestingly enough, there was another Jesus some 30 years later who also said the Temple would be destroyed whom they flogged and questioned, only to be released: He continued his lament in the courts of the Temple for another seven years, just before Rome marched into Jerusalem and destroyed it. SOURCE: E. P. Sanders, "The Life of Jesus," in *Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism: A Parallel History of Their Origins and Early Development* (Washington D.C.: Pearson, 2011), 86.

wine because, joy can never be complete when so many are mourning the deaths of their firstborn sons. They would explain that the door was marked with blood, a sign of salvation, and the angel of death would pass over the house. They would eat particular foods to remind them of the bitter sufferings of slavery and the freedom God won for them. Passover is an enduring national story for all Jews. As remarkable as this story is, it does not encapsulate the fullness of Passover.

Jesus became the Master Storyteller, as He shared the story of the Passover that night, but He also shined new light in the shadows of that upper room, revealing details that were hidden from plain view. He used the opportunity to teach His disciples a new lesson that is repeated in many congregations, year after year, on Holy Thursday. Jesus brought a new teaching before His disciples, that they are to love one another fully, as He had loved them. He demonstrated what humble service is, as the Master became the one who served those whom He loved. No servant is above the Master, so, in great humility, we are to do likewise.

Another layer to the story is the mystery of the Eucharist. Here Christ reorients our understanding of the food that is used in the Passover meal. The bread is the bread of His affliction, but it is the bread of life for us, given for our sins. It is the flesh we eat so that we would have His life in us. And the wine of thanksgiving becomes the blood of our salvation, marking us as those redeemed by God. The blood-soaked doors in Egypt gave way to the single blood-soaked door of His cross in Jerusalem, the door which opens heaven for us. There is sorrow on this night, as we mark the betrayal, arrest, and sham trial of Jesus. Tomorrow, the darkness of His death will confront us. But this meal is not merely about the past. It is forward looking. This meal always looks forward to the resurrection and the victory of the Kingdom of God. So, our joy in this meal is complete. From a meal and a story, God shapes the Church as He once shaped Israel.

Having received salvation on our lips, we can depart in peace. This story shapes our understanding of the world around us. It tells us that God loves us and serves us with His gifts. It tells us that God is no fan of tyranny and mindless submission, but He wants us free to love Him. It tells us that we are a people, called by God for a real purpose. Christ has a story reaching back to ancient Israel in history, yet it originates before time itself in Him. His story is our story, and in His story, our meaning is revealed. Let us love one another and love Him because He has first loved us. May we never grow tired of hearing His story.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.