

## A Liturgy of Hope

Sermon 71 | Greystone Baptist Church | September 6, 2020

Exodus 12: 1-14

Under normal circumstances plagues are the makings of movies and history books. Whether we are talking about the bubonic plague that tore through Europe in the Middle Ages or the plagues of biblical proportion that flooded Egypt with frogs, locusts, and boils... under normal circumstances, plagues happen to other people.

Except, in case you haven't noticed, there is nothing normal about 2020.

From COVID-19 to earthquakes, hurricanes to wildfires, from killer hornets to mysterious seeds arriving in the mail, this year is starting to feel like a year with plagues of biblical proportion. The parallels apply also to the meal made in haste as the Israelites prepared to leave Egypt. We too are learning to make do with whatever we can find at the grocery stores as waves of shortages continue to surprise us. From all-purpose flour to bacon, to canning jar lids, many of the things we have always had on-demand have forced our hand at culinary innovation.

We remember those plagues that the Israelites endured as God and Pharaoh battled with one another over the liberation of God's people. And from our own places of isolation, boredom, frustration, and pandemic fatigue, we are beginning to see ourselves within this story. Perhaps for the first time, we understand the feelings of paralysis and powerlessness to bring about change.

From this new place of understanding however, it might seem a bit odd that God would invite the people into a liturgical act such as the one described in today's reading from Exodus 12.

Our reading picks up after the ninth plague, after God and Pharaoh have been at war with one another for quite a while. God trying anything to soften Pharaoh's heart, and Pharaoh refusing to let the people go.

God was trying to free the people from captivity so that they could live the way God created them to live. For much of the Exodus story, the Israelite people are passive participants watching from the sidelines as Yahweh and Pharaoh duke it out. There isn't a whole lot they can do, until the last plague comes.

At first glance the reading might seem full of tedious details, instructions we can skim over in order to get to the end of the story. But what is really unfolding is a beautiful wartime liturgy, carefully planned as a participatory act of resistance, ritual, and memory.<sup>1</sup> Whereas before the Israelites watched and waited as the first nine plagues engulfed Egypt, now, for this final action of God on their behalf, they had a liturgical role to play.

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<sup>1</sup> Concept of "wartime liturgy" found in commentary by Michael J. Chan at [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=4569](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4569)

Liturgy isn't really a word we use in our everyday lives, but according to scholar and author, James K. A. Smith, liturgies do *shape* our lives every day. "All kinds of cultural rhythms and routines are, in fact, rituals that function as pedagogies of desire precisely because they tacitly and covertly train us to love a certain version of the kingdom, teach us to long for some rendition of the good life. These aren't just things we do; they do something *to us*."<sup>2</sup> These actions we do each and every day train us – heart, mind, body, and soul – and focus our attention on the things of this world. The things to which we dedicate our time, thoughts, and energy focus us on money, social power, and communal respect. They subconsciously teach us that bigger houses, tidy lawns, and comfortable retirement portfolios are the ultimate goals worthy of our undivided attention. Over time, these unintentional rhythms, these habits we develop *do something to us* as they dominate our lives. For this reason, Smith concludes, people of faith participate in religious rituals and carefully crafted liturgies to re-shape our focus, to re-orient us toward God and the things that matter to God's kingdom.

This is exactly what the Israelites are doing in this twelfth chapter of Exodus. Like a carefully choreographed ballet, they go out on the first day of the month to select a lamb. Then on the fourteenth at twilight they each slaughter the lamb and smear the blood on the doorposts. Then they gather around tables in dimly lit homes, they roast and eat the lamb, with unleavened bread, and bitter herbs. The meal is to be consumed in a hurry with "girded loins and sandals on the feet". This was the first, the original Passover meal, because as the Israelites participated in this liturgy, God's final plague was passing by. The ritual acts of finding, slaughtering, and roasting the lamb... the markings of blood on the door, the gathering together around the family table to eat with haste all had a purpose. This was the night the war between Pharaoh and God would end. This was the night liberation would be won, and while it was unfolding in cosmic proportion the people were attentively reorienting themselves toward God in unison with one another. They couldn't see one another from their separate homes and dining tables, but still they were all doing the same things as one congregation, one family, one people trusting that God would make a way.

This year as Christians re-imagined Easter within the context of COVID-19 and stay-at-home orders, our Jewish sisters and brothers observed their Passover meal, the one modeled after this first Passover from Exodus. Via Zoom and Webex, screens united families like windows into those ancient homes where the people of faith went through the motions of sacred ritual to re-orient their lives from Egypt to the Promised Land, from captivity to freedom... from the rhythms of this world to the rhythms of God's kingdom.

Reflecting on the Passover during the 2020 coronavirus plague, Rabbis and faithful Jews all over the United States remarked at the fresh lens this contemporary plague provides for us as we read and interpret the Exodus story. "Whatever the story was thousands of years ago applies today," one woman from Austin said, "We will take the situation where we are,

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<sup>2</sup> James K. A. Smith. *You Are What You Love*. 22.

and we will overcome it and have freedom again... We have no choice but to have faith in God and that [God] will take care of us.”<sup>3</sup>

As Christians we do not traditionally participate in the liturgy of the Passover Seder. But we do, at the beginning of each month, participate in our own liturgy of the Lord’s Supper. We do gather around our table in the sanctuary of our church and repeat the words Jesus spoke when he celebrated the meal with his disciples. Often we fail to mention that this meal was first a Passover Seder. Jesus, the Jewish boy from Nazareth was invoking his religious symbols, he was remembering and celebrating the liberation that God won for his people when they were freed from the bonds of Egypt. And in doing so he was reminding himself and his disciples that God was still working to free the people from all that kept them from being who God had created them to be.

When Jesus took the bread, broke it, and said, “this is my body, broken for you,” he knew that soon *his own* body would be broken for the liberation of the world. And when he took the cup and said, “this my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many,” he knew what awaited him was the Roman cross.

Like the faith echoed around our Communion tables this morning, Jesus knew that whatever situation he was in, he would experience freedom again, because God would take care of him.

Preparing the elements might have seemed cumbersome or trivial. Maybe he and his disciples had grown bored with the lamb, the unleavened bread, or the bitter herbs. But the rhythm and repetition of the meal grounded them, centered them, and united them all with a collective memory and around a common practice of faith in the God who would take care of them, no matter what.

On days like today, perhaps we are growing weary of our homemade communion tables, set with whatever carb and juice we happened to have in the pantry. Perhaps the creativity with which we took our first communion in pandemic isolation has worn off and the fun of that little experiment is gone. Even still, with spiritual discipline and holy memory we set our individual tables with whatever we can find, hoping that somehow through the embodiment of the communion liturgy we might be reunited with our whole congregation as one family, sisters and brothers in Christ, refusing to give up hope because our hope is found in the God who freed the Israelites from Pharaoh’s grip, the God who raised Jesus from the tomb, and the God who is still working to resurrect the Kingdom even here... even now.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.statesman.com/news/20200408/passover-during-pandemic-new-meaning-in-ancient-story>