

Hespeler, 6 September 2020 © Scott McAndless

Exodus 12:1-14, Psalm 149, Romans 13:8-14, Matthew 18:15-20

Do you remember Easter of this year? It was, many of us confessed, the weirdest Easter any of us had ever experienced. We were about a month into the pandemic lockdown and I think that many of us were still telling ourselves at that point that surely this would be all over soon. Maybe – we held onto this idea for a while – maybe it would even be over by Easter.

But no, when that festival rolled around, there we were; shut up in separate houses. The doors of our houses were locked because we were afraid to be with other people because of the virus that stalked out in the streets. I heard many people say that it didn't seem like Easter at all and the maybe Easter should be cancelled or postponed. And you may also recall that I preached on that Sunday that far from cancelling Easter, we were actually living it – that we were just like the disciples locked up in their upper room in fear on Easter Sunday. Their fear didn't stop Jesus from rising for them and ours wouldn't stop him rising for us.

I could not help but think of Easter Sunday as I thought about our worship here today and, especially, as I looked at our reading from the Book of Exodus this morning. It is now twenty-one weeks after Easter. That is a long time. And, in many ways, it may feel like we're in exactly the same place we were then – still living with restrictions, still worried about the virus, still often hiding indoors as often as possible because what's outside is dangerous.

The truth is, however, that we're not quite in the same place. We're wearing masks now – that wasn't really in view in April – and certainly some restrictions are eased. But I'm talking about something else that is really very different. It is one thing to be about a month into a crisis; it is quite another to be six months in. We've now kind of blown past that initial adrenaline phase. We're past the "let's all pull together and be heroic because we can do this" phase. And even the conspiracy theorist and anti-mask and anti-vax phase of this whole mess has gotten extremely tired. We have just settled into this new routine of a life that just doesn't seem to be what it's supposed to be. We are just tired and what do we do with that?

Well, here is the context of our reading this morning from the book of Exodus. The people of Israel have been in Egypt for a long time. They have been dealing with a crisis in Egypt, a crisis far worse than a pandemic, of course, a crisis of slavery.



Here we (still) are

And they have been enslaved so long that they have blown past that initial adrenaline phase. They're past the "let's all pull together and be heroic because we can do this" phase. And even the conspiracy theorist of Israelite turning against Israelite and "maybe the Egyptians are actually the good guys" phase of this whole mess has gotten extremely tired.

They have just settled into this new routine of a life of slavery that just isn't what it's supposed to be. And the question is, after all this time and when this new reality just seems to be the way the world is, how can you even begin to dream about something different and something better? I kind of feel a lot of kinship with them on that front right now.

And the story we read this morning is about how God transferred them out of that state. The opening words are, I feel, significant. **"This month shall mark for you the beginning of months;"** God says, **"it shall be the first month of the year for you."** And here we are too, at the beginning of a new year in the life of the church, of school, of the business cycle. Yes, I know that technically the year begins in January, but practically we all know that it begins in September. And I know that all of us are wondering, as this year begins, what on earth it is going to look like because it ain't going to work quite like any year we have seen before.

So here is the circumstance as the Israelites begin this new year in their life. **"For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt."** And I realize that a lot of people really struggle with this famous tenth plague of Egypt. The idea that God could willfully strike down the children of a country, even for the worthwhile goal of setting people free from slavery, is rather disturbing. But I do not think that you have to interpret the story in exactly that way.

Yes, this crisis is described as God passing through Egypt and striking people down, but it is also described as a plague. There is also no description of how or why people died. Understand that this was a story told by a people who had a tendency to describe any disturbing event as the action of some god. It is not a huge stretch to imagine that this was just their way of talking about a pestilence of some sort that spread through the land and that particularly affected a certain demographic. Such things, after all, have happened again and again throughout human history and still happen today.

So, let's just imagine for a moment, that that is what this is describing – some kind of deadly epidemic. That would certainly give us a different point of view on the instructions that Moses gives to the Israelites. Isn't he basically telling them that, in order to survive this disease, they have to take

some very specific measures? They have to shelter in place only with the members of their own family or, at most, with one other family in their bubble. **“They are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbour in obtaining one.”**

They need to follow some very specific food preparation instructions and leave no leftovers because, of course, food storage failures are a common vector for disease. **“They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn.”**

And they need to mark the doors of their households to ensure communitywide compliance with these guidelines. The promise is that, if they do all this, the people will be able to survive this particular crisis while those who don't take these measures, like the Egyptians, will suffer because of it. It is kind of like if you were to compare how Canada and the US did in terms of following the advice of public health experts and then you were to compare how the two countries have done in terms of the spread of covid-19.

But actually the point of this story in Exodus is not to exult over those who did not do as well in following instructions. I firmly believe that the story of the Passover is not intended to entrap the people of Israel in the story of their enslavement and their escape from slavery, but rather to get them to focus on what comes next – on building a new life and a new reality after the crisis. That is why the focus is on Passover being the beginning of the year and it is especially why they are told to eat it in a rather peculiar manner. **This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the LORD.”**

Now, why do we have this rather odd piece of instruction? Because the Passover is all about beginning a new way of life, a post-crisis life and a post-slavery life. That means being willing to leave the past behind, even though it is comforting and familiar, and embracing the new reality the God is putting in front of the people.

And, if you read on in the Book of Exodus, you realize that this was not really something that came very easily to the people of Israel. They were constantly griping and complaining and wanting to go back to Egypt because the new reality was unfamiliar and it was hard. But it was the way forward and this Passover meal was instituted to cement that truth in their consciousness.

Like I say, I do feel a particular kinship with the people of Israel at this moment in their story. We are gathered today and we are gathered in our own particular homes. We have taken communion together, but we ate it isolated within our household bubbles. It is a Passover meal. This particular meal will not mark the end of this crisis for us as it did for them. We're not out of the woods yet as far as covid-19 is concerned and I do not know when that time will come, but I do know that it will come. There will be a day, and I pray it will be soon, when we greet the dawn without any substantial worry that there is a coronavirus out there waiting for us.

The plague will pass over. And I am going to suggest to you right now that the way that we ate this meal here today and the way we do other things right now in the time of crisis needs to become all about how we will live in that new reality when it comes. I challenge you to eat it with your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand.

What does that mean? I realize that the phrase "gird your loins" is not quite everyday speech for most people today and it might even sound a little bit off-colour, but the meaning is pretty straightforward. People in that world normally wore long flowing robes which are great for standing or sitting or walking. They are particularly refreshing in a nice cool breeze, but, as you can imagine, kind of get in the way when you're doing anything more strenuous. So they would just take up their skirts and tie them around their waist when they needed to run or fight or do anything else of the sort.

So put that together with the instruction to have your sandals on and your walking staff in your hand and what this instruction means is that they are supposed to eat with a readiness to move out and to move on. They are to **"eat it hurriedly"** because they can't wait to embrace the newness that God is preparing for them.

Now, as human beings, we generally have this habit of seeing a festival or a holiday as an occasion to look back. On Christmas, for example, we always get nostalgic for the Christmases of the past. Festivals are a chance to breakout old traditions, old recipes and old memories. But Passover is meant to be different. Passover is meant to be a call to look forward to the new life the people are called to live in their new freedom. And that is why I think it is the type of festival that we need at the beginning of this year.

I do not know when our particular release from Egypt will come – when the pandemic restrictions will all be lifted. I know we're not there yet, but that day is coming. And it is my belief that we need to meet that day with our loins girded, our sandals on our feet and our staffs in our hands. We cannot afford to go into that new reality while we are constantly grumbling and complaining about how things used to be back in Egypt. God has prepared something new for us and I hope that the feast we have shared today has given you a taste for that newness.