

“Remembering” Liturgically

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

Like John 3 weeks ago, I'd like to register my own complaint here: I'm a little frustrated with the way the lectionary has stiffed us! Last Sunday Moses attended to a burning bush and we all learned that God is up to something—not only by God's revealed intentions, but also by God's self-revealed Name! And now, presto, we've skipped over some of those most startling “somethings”. We call them the plagues. Throughout these plagues God has checked and will checkmate the anti-creation chaos, or “creation reversal forces,” embodied in Pharaoh. The Pharaoh, as you may recall, is worshiped as one of Egypt's many gods. He began enslaving Israel, then by trying to kill Hebrew baby boys—and so acting against God's mandate to humanity and to Israel to be fruitful and multiply. Since, he has repeatedly refused to free God's people and allow them to worship this God Who is his competition; he has continued in defiance of God. His sin has had cosmic, chaos-reverting consequences. In the plagues the entire created order has been caught up in the struggle, either as cause or as victim. God *executes judgment*, acting to trounce all the Egyptian gods very publicly, to re-establish the created order, and to ensure that God's intentions be fulfilled. The lectionary lands us here on the verge of God's “checkmate.” The tension has been building; Moses has declared to Pharaoh's face the smack-down, the death of the Egyptian firstborn. Then comes the non sequitur of today's lectionary passage...

What are your defining moments? [Yeah, pretty much that kind of non sequitur. But bear with me...] What are the before-and-after markers of your own story—the events that changed you radically? You might first think “spiritual”—a before-and-after conversion experience. But think of our embodied lives, the reality that the physical and spiritual intermingle—in our case, the birth of our first child as just the beginning of parenting as “sanctifying grace.”

Those moments of new beginning so impact us that they change, or “reset,” our personal calendars. We begin to describe our history with phrases like, “before we had kids.” Our Western calendar used to use B.C. and A.D. designations that commemorated the birth of Jesus. As our text today abruptly turns to discuss, the Exodus event, THE defining moment for Israel's identity, literally resets their annual calendar. From now on, this Passover Feast is to be their “New Year's.” God acts to reestablish creation mandates and creation order in rescuing God's people--how fitting then that their birthday, or New Year's, be brought in synch with the spring of the year, the annual rebirth of the created order!

But isn't it odd, that this resetting of New Year to the night of Passover shows up in our text before the Passover actually happens??? That final plague, the death of Egypt's firstborn with the protection (or passing over) of Israel's firstborn, doesn't happen until later in this chapter! And isn't it odd that there's another gap, with the rest of the story (the trip to and, miraculously, through the Red Sea) not commencing until the last half of chapter 13??? Well, no. It's very intentional, literarily, and very significant, theologically.

The last plague is announced by Moses, but the account of its implementation is delayed, interrupted by these details of worship feasts. Literarily this retards the action and creates suspense. We all wait for the other shoe to drop! But more than that, neither the content nor the placement of these interruptions is random. The content is liturgical; these “interruptions” bracket and shape how we are to interpret the events they surround.

Let’s try to step back far enough to see the forest as well as the trees! The shaping of the book of Exodus shows that it is permeated with worship. It’s a little too bulky to call a “worship folder”—can we call it a “worship manual”?!? The account of the last plague is embedded in a setting of worship. Today’s text—and the Exodus event itself--is not merely an account, but liturgy! Today’s text is the first half of two literary inclusions that bracket and shape the story of that defining night and day for Israel. Each of the sets of “brackets” that interrupt, or set off, that story is liturgical! The first half of chapter 12 recounts the instructions for Passover feasting, followed by the plague itself, with a closing bracket of more instructions about Passover rituals. Then the first half of chapter 13 deals with instructions on consecration of the firstborn and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, bracketing the Red Sea events together with the worship songs of chapter 15!

Why, we ask?!? Let’s leave off the whole forest perspective and step back closer to our passage. In particular, let’s ask: who is God in this text? Notice whose voice it is we hear: the passage begins, *The LORD said to Moses & Aaron!* God is acting, not only to rescue, but also to shape and to form God’s people. God prescribes and describes this worship, from the details of how to eat the lamb when, and with whom, and where—in houses displaying the lamb’s blood on the doorways. Hear again God’s summary in verse 14: *This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.*

Last week Ruth helped us read Scripture like Latinos; this week we need to read like Jews. We Americans (yes, even you postmoderns, I suspect) too easily default to modernity’s Enlightenment weakness. That is, we give priority to the individual intellect, the cognitive. So we tend to understand remembering only as a solitary experience involving mental recall. For Jews remembrance is a corporate act in which the event remembered is experienced anew through ritual, through re-enacting bodily. Their past is brought forward into their present. We’re talking here not merely about remembering as mental recall, but, in geeky theological terms, as “anamnesis.” Literally, that term means, “the drawing near of memory.” It’s about what **we do now**, not what **I think about then**. Here I quote pastor/theologian Jim Fitzgerald: *The call to remembrance ... means more than simply “don’t forget.” It brings past events into the present. We not only remember an event in an historical sense; we make it a present tense event. [Thus] Jews during the Passover, recall the Exodus events as if they themselves were participants. ...* So the events of the Exodus move from simply being an account of Jewish corporate history to becoming a present event for the audience every year, both for the group and for the individual. Re-enacted as liturgy, this event has each generation owning and claiming God’s deliverance, enacting and entering into the event. “God delivered US.”

Our embodied rituals shape us humans. Along with James K.A. Smith we of St. Paul's affirm that embodied worship brings our hearts and minds in alignment with our bodies! But even more than that is happening here. This enacted ritual is a sacramental vehicle for making redemption real and effective for every generation. The re-enactment brings deliverance just as much as the original event did! In this liturgy the people of Israel are not merely recalling, but so entering into the reality of the event as to be individually redeemed as part of God's people. The saving power of the original event is made available to every generation by God's redeeming activity in the context of that worship. The people's response both commemorates and prepares the way for God's deliverance!

And you know where I'm going with this...who are we in this text? We Christ-followers too are shaped by a liturgy of remembrance, of re-enactment through worship. Every week we hear again Jesus' words, as the bread and then the cup are consecrated: *Do this in remembrance of me*. You may not have realized it, but we are practicing anamnesis! Our obedience to his call to remember lies in our doing, not in our thinking. Again, per Fitzgerald: *our remembrance of Christ in communion is much more than just a reminder not to forget him. It becomes a present tense event—the past comes forward into the present--Christ is made present with us*. So every week we are invited: "come now and receive Christ." We affirm and experience the Gospel promise that Christ IS among us, gathered at this Table in his name.

Very deliberately standing in the rituals of Passover, during a Passover meal, this One Whom we the church understand as the Passover Lamb appropriated and reshaped a fuller remembrance for a fuller deliverance...fuller for the individual and fuller in scope. Now it is for all of humanity, not just God's "window exhibit" of Israel. Now any "window shoppers," their noses pressed to the glass, looking in with longing at the God revealed to and through Israel, are welcomed. We too are invited to participate, to experience this deliverance of this God.

We celebrate the Lord's Table, a fuller Passover. Like Israel, we "celebrate" a feast as worship, with thanksgiving. (The word Eucharist itself means "giving thanks"!) This meal, too, finds the response of God's people both commemorating and preparing the way for God's redemption. With glad and grateful hearts we partake in the indescribable gift of the Triune God—and give thanks!