

We are at the height of drama in the Exodus story. It's an interesting one because there is a meal at the very center, not just of this text but of our faith. Have you ever considered that? It's a strange thought to think that a meal is at the center of what makes our faith unique. Here we are in this text, the height of drama in which all nine plagues have happened. You see this barrage of drama unfold between God, Moses, and Pharaoh.

Then we arrived at the 10th plague, and everything slams to a halt. We essentially get instructions for a meal. While that seems odd at first, meals do, in fact, play an important role in our lives. We mark the passing of years by meals, birthday meals. We consider wedding feasts and anniversaries by meals. Think of first dates or other kinds of big life transitions. We utilize meals as markers to celebrate key important points. There's something intuitive with us that we recognize a sacredness around the table.

I'd argue, in the modern world, we've lost the meal, and we're a more eating centric culture rather than a meal centric culture. Do you catch the difference? The invention of something like fast food has morphed food less from something in which we enjoy around a table as a meal, as something we just consume for our own sustenance.

Of course, that is mixed in there, but historically, meals were far more than just opportunities to consume sustenance. Meals were something sacred. It's something in which you welcome others around the table. Lindsay and I had the privilege of living in Napa for six years before moving here, and hospitality is at the very core of Napa Valley. It's the very ethos of what it is. In those six years, we learned about the sacredness of a table. About what it means to sit in long meals with wandering conversation and where the hours go on and on. You begin to share more than just the sustenance; you're sharing life with one another.

There's also something quite ordinary about meals. Most of us eat plenty of them throughout the week. We have access to food in such a way that the meal becomes quite ordinary. It's this context between the sacred and the ordinary that we find at a table. It's a very interesting mix. In some ways, it makes sense that at the center of our faith is a meal. Because that sacredness and ordinariness all converge on this main theme that at every single meal you partake in, you actually embody and act out one of the central core truths of what it means to live—from death comes life.

At that meal, whether it's a salad or a steak or anything in between, some plant or animal dies in order for us to consume it.

From death comes life. That is a central truth of what it means to be human and what it means to live in this world. At this meal that we encounter in Exodus 12, we particularly find the truth that from death comes life. It's this meal that we find in the Exodus story, in which we come to the height of the centrality of our faith in a meal, in which we come before the height of our faith in a meal. That is both for the Jewish people, its center point, and then a reworked meal in Jesus in the gospels, at the communion table, in which we find that same meal, but tweaked ever so slightly, that it becomes the center point of our faith as Christians.

I want to explore this meal, and I want us to hold that image of life from death because this is a troubling text. It's a hard text to get through, but if you anchor it in the truth that from death comes life, we can make a little more sense of it.

Just a few chapters earlier, Moses had gone before Pharaoh, and Pharaoh asked the question, "Who is Yahweh that I should obey him?" Put differently, Pharaoh was asking what was so unique about Moses' God. So, this rivalry takes place, and Yahweh and Pharaoh are confronting and wrestling with this tension. It said earlier in Exodus that God had the foreknowledge to know Pharaoh, the most powerful and most evil man we've encountered so far in the scriptures, would only relent and let the Israelite people go out of their oppression if a similarly heinous and powerful or severe act is brought against Pharaoh.

That's the context in which we find the plagues, including the last plague. *"The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in Egypt, 'This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year' (vv. 1-2).* There are two things that are of note at this point. First, they're still in Egypt. You're not on the other side of it. They haven't been liberated yet. And God is saying, "Let's slow everything down and talk about roast lamb for a little bit." It seems odd.

But then notice the way the whole thing starts between God and Moses and Aaron. God is up to something new. God is instituting this meal as the beginning point of something radically new that would reshape the very understanding of history for the Jewish people. One commentator said, "This institution of a powerful, everlasting observance whereby God's love for his people Israel will be remembered—indeed, reenacted—is integral to our understanding of God's purpose in redeeming his people." It appears clear that the purpose of these celebrations is for the benefit of those generations who did not participate in the Exodus itself. God was beginning something new that for generation

after generation, they would organize their life around what has become known as the Passover feast.

It's what we celebrate around these tables once a month. Generations past, we are still gathering to celebrate Passover. With this meal, God was up to something new within this people who he would soon liberate from their 430 year enslavement, and it's all focused around the table. Let's learn about this meal.

Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month, each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household. If any household is too small for a whole lamb, they must share one with their nearest neighbor, having taken into account the number of people there are. You are to determine the amount of lamb needed in accordance with what each person will eat. The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect, and you may take them from the sheep or the goats. Take care of them until the fourteenth day of the month, when all the members of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight. Exodus 12:3-6

We've been racing through these plague narratives, but now we slow down and God is creating the context for the meal and says there's enough for everyone. Every household is to go out and get a lamb, and if there's not enough for one family, then they join together. They bring households together. Meals are when we welcome all around the table and you see it here. It's the beginning in which God says there's enough.

Then there are hints within this that you begin to see this lamb is distinct from the others. It's to be without blemish or without defect. There's something about the innocence of this particular lamb or goat that is brought into this scene, because at the very core of this whole story, and the whole story of the Christian faith, is the death of an innocent victim brings life. From death comes life, and you see this here in this lamb, without defect.

There's a call to the people of Israel here, in which they are to be faithful to what God is doing. Because here's the interesting thing, throughout the nine plagues, God has had no problem distinguishing between Israel and Egypt without them doing anything. But here there's a call to faithfulness. God is now inviting the Israelites to take part in this plague, to take part in their own redemption in some way. They have to trust God with what's happening.

Think of the context of 430 years in slavery, and now they're at the height of all of that oppression, and God is telling them to take a lamb and slaughter it and have a meal. The invitation is to trust. The preparation would be time-consuming. The moment the meal arrives is one in which they want to just get out of there. And yet God is inviting them into this slow, methodical process, inviting them to trust him.

Then they are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses where they eat the lambs. That same night they are to eat the meat roasted over the fire, along with bitter herbs and bread made without yeast. Do not eat the meat raw or boiled in water, but roast it over a fire—with the head, legs and internal organs. Do not leave any of it till morning; if some is left till morning, you must burn it. This is how you are to eat it: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the Lord's Passover. Exodus 12:7-11

So throughout this section, you see hints in which God is saying, "We are going to prepare and slow down" and invite them into this meal, but yet, there are these nuances where he says they are to eat it in haste. All of these little hints are also God's way of meeting the people where they are and telling them that while they trust him in this, there is still a hastiness that is lying beneath the surface.

The invitation to make bread without yeast is a way of speeding up the process of bread making. Roasting the lamb over the fire would have been the quickest way to prepare that lamb. You didn't need to draw water. You didn't need to clean the pots. Your cloak is tucked into the belt, sandals are on the feet, staff is in your hand, and you eat in haste.

There's a sense in which the faithfulness of Israel is being met by the recognition of God that they're ready, and there's this tension in which they're meeting in the middle. God is saying, "In a short time, you will depart and be liberated from your slavery." All of this is an act of trust. All the aspects of the cooking and the eating were designed to minimize time and maximize preparedness for the sudden departure of Egypt. As the story unfolds, that's exactly what you see.

"On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn of both people and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the Lord. The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt. Exodus 12:12-13

Here is where the story takes a difficult turn. For the skeptic in the room, I understand you come to a text like this and see God passing through Egypt, striking down the firstborn. You begin to wonder if this God is just the same monster as Pharaoh. You raise these questions but notice that God is responding in kind to Pharaoh and what we know of the story of Pharaoh. At the beginning of this narrative, the drama was about Pharaoh killing or an act of genocide, decreeing genocide on all Hebrew boys. So you see God acting in kind. Now, that doesn't quite absolve God in our minds, but you can recognize it wasn't perfectly in kind.

This is the 10th plague, which means it came after the first nine plagues. It also means that the first plague, when God turned the Nile into blood, was his way of saying, "Pharaoh, I see what you did. You have blood on your hands." And the invitation with every single plague was for Pharaoh to relent. It was God telling Pharaoh that his heart didn't have to be hardened in this way. "Let my people go." But each time, Pharaoh's heart became hard, and he continued to oppress the people. You get an image of a God who is patient and merciful and is inviting the oppressor to change from his ways, and yet, justice must still be carried out for the people enslaved. They longed for a God who served justice.

So we arrive at this 10th plague. But even in the 10th plague, God is not acting directly in kind to Pharaoh, but something adjacent. God created a way in which all people, anyone, could escape the severity of this plague. He did it through this wiping of the blood on the doorposts and over the entryway of their houses. The point is it spared those who demonstrated their faith in God by the blood of the Lamb.

The people of God have been invited into this drama, this relationship with the Lord, and they see this all unfolding, but God creates a way in which they can actually be safe from this last judgment from God onto all people. What's beautiful about it is you see this in the seventh plague as well with hail, in which God said, when the hail comes, anyone can take their livestock and whoever, Egyptian or otherwise, go into a house and you will be spared.

There's evidence of that. You'll see next week when the people of God were exiting out of Egypt that there is this little hint, this line that says it wasn't just the Israelites leaving, but there are people from other nations leaving as well. What's happening is that some of the Egyptians are beginning to betray Pharaoh and clearly say that this is the one true God, *Yahweh*.

The Israelites welcomed the enemy. They loved the enemy. Right in the text they invite them to be spared and what we'll see is the same thing is true here That the judgment that God is laying on the land is holy. It is going across every single person and any who would want to avoid that must simply trust in the blood of the Lamb and enter into the house. This is a severe picture of God's justice. For some of us, this is hard, even with maybe some of those things to understand.

There's two concepts that we have to elucidate from this text, if we're going to at least contextualize all of this. The first is the idea of a firstborn, because God specifically says he will strike down the firstborn. The second is the principle of substitution. Let's take each of those in turn.

First, the concept of the firstborn: We have to recognize that this wasn't just a random act of payback against Pharaoh; rather, it was a specific strike that was directed at Egyptian firstborns.

This is specific in two ways. There was a direct correlation to Pharaoh's genocidal act. Second, it was God exercising his right over the firstborn of every family. As modern Western Americans who've been shaped by radical individualism, we have a difficult time conceiving the importance of a firstborn. But in the ancient imagination, the firstborn of the family was the one who carried all of the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of the family.

Not only that, but they would be the ones who inherited all that they had. Think of the old trope in movies in which a king dies, and who is the next in line to the crown? The firstborn, regardless of their character, regardless of if they were ready. The firstborn was central to the life of the family. So, when you consider the logic that it all began with Pharaoh casting this genocidal act against all Hebrew boys, it was one that transgresses not just the moral degradation of the act. There's something just obviously inherent.

We all get that it is inherently wrong to kill as an act of genocide. But what you find when you think of this concept of the firstborn is that by Pharaoh killing Israel's children, he's not simply killing God's people, but he's actually killing God's property and inheritance. It's an attack not just against people but at the very core of Yahweh. He was trying to essentially kill off his rival God. It is something much deeper and much more hard.

Pharaoh's act of throwing those children into the Nile was an affront to God, not just because of its moral depravity, but because it was the delusional spirit of Pharaoh who was trying to thwart God's authority and divinity. So you see in this tension between mercy and justice that God is not acting randomly, but specifically against the firstborn because he is trying to communicate to Pharaoh that this is not how this operates. God actually has the right to all firstborns. But still, we wrestle with what it means.

The next question is about substitution. The natural question is why couldn't God just pluck the Israelites out and take them out somewhere? Or why couldn't they just kill off Pharaoh? Those are good questions. However, the problem is the tension between mercy and justice, which we talked about last week. The wickedness of Pharaoh demanded an act of justice. Let's take each of those questions in turn. First, if you were to just take out Pharaoh, the problem is, we all understand human nature, that there would just be another Pharaoh, and that's what takes place in the narrative. There are multiple Pharaohs within the Exodus story. There's one tyrant after another. So there's a problem in the sense you can't just take Pharaoh out because humans are wicked, and there needs to be a sense of justice.

Why couldn't you just pluck the Israelites out and plop them on the other side of the Red Sea? Well, that also has trouble with that act of justice. Because you catch that justice requires a response. We have a hard time with this, particularly the concept of substitution, because we can't fathom the idea that an individual could take shame on behalf of others. But I want to invite

you to see is that it is a rather American concept. A very modern one. This concept of the firstborn, if the firstborn succeeded, it would bring honor to the entire family. Or if the firstborn was shameful, it would bring shame on the entire family.

The ancient understanding of family was not as shaped by individualism as we are. It didn't have an issue with the concept of the brokenness of one person spreading to all or the inverse, the goodness of one person spreading to all. When we think through this concept of substitution, we have to think about the firstborn and justice, and then I implore you to set aside some of the individualism in which we've been shaped. Consider that if most cultures across most eras of history have not wrestled with this in the same way that we do, maybe we've been shaped more by our individualistic worldview, and that's what creates this distance.

Look down at Exodus 12:21. Here's where it begins when you see the evil heinousness of Pharaoh that demands an act of justice that is matching that severity.

Then Moses summoned all the elders of Israel and said to them, "Go at once and select the animals for your families and slaughter the Passover lamb. Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it into the blood in the basin and put some of the blood on the top and on both sides of the doorframe. None of you shall go out of the door of your house until morning. When the Lord goes through the land to strike down the Egyptians, he will see the blood on the top and sides of the doorframe and will pass over that doorway, and he will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses and strike you down. Exodus 12:21-23

It was through Tim Keller I saw this pointed out to me, but did you notice in verses 22-23 it says, "None of you shall go out of the door of your house until morning...When the Lord goes through the land to strike down the Egyptians, he will see the blood on the top and sides of the doorframe." This means that if you're inside a house covered by blood, you're safe from the plague.

But what that also means is that this act of judgment is universal. It's entirely egalitarian. It's not one set aside from the other, but rather everyone, Egyptian and Israelite alike are subject to the judgment that is coming. Play this out a little further.

The severity of Pharaoh's act demanded justice, but what we find when we deliver or cry out for justice if we're honest with ourselves, is although we may not be in a position of influence and power as Pharaoh, we all have a little Pharaoh in us. We all have a little Egyptian in us. The heinousness of Pharaoh is explicitly shown. It's for us to see that. But we would be naive to think that we haven't also contributed to the brokenness of the world. That we, too, have not transgressed, that we too have not committed some sin or brokenness that has also created a debt, a need for justice.

Do you see it? God says, "You can enter the house, but everyone is going to experience this justice because the only way to bring justice is to do it wholly, for everyone, across all spectrums." But God then invites them in. In Exodus 12:30, you see that there was not a house without someone dead, which is radically, again, democratizing the whole thing. It was experienced in Pharaoh's house at the top, with all the power and authority, and all the way at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder as well. Every house experienced this judgment.

Keller says it this way, and it's blunt and hard, but it's meant to be. "In every single house, there was either a dead son or a dead lamb" (Keller). Our sin created a debt in which that must be paid in some way. We still have a hard time with this because you have a hard time saying things in a postmodern world. People think that there's no debt, there's no moral universal code in which they have broken that we must pay back.

Let's play this logic out a little bit. Even if we want to take aside the idea of a universal moral code, which is devastating for all sorts of different reasons, even if you are the arbiter of what is right and wrong in your own life, you have some set of standards in which you hold yourself and others to. I would guess that if we followed you around for your entire life, you would quickly find that you have not even lived up to your own standards. There is, in fact, some brokenness. You may say that we are called to love. Maybe it's the golden rule. Do unto others as you do unto yourself. I wager a lot of money that if we watch the tape back of your life, you would not be able to live to that standard in its entirety.

Here's the problem: When that infraction comes, it creates a debt that must be paid somewhere. Let me give you an example. Let's consider the fact that maybe you had a relationship in which there was something that went awry, a friendship, a roommate, whatever it was, in which there was a brokenness. Someone harmed you, or you harmed the other. That creates a relational barrier. If there's a transgression that takes place, it creates a barrier between you and the other person. At that moment, you have two opportunities to reconcile it. You can pay back the debt, and that tends to look like berating them, mocking them, talking about them behind their back.

What happens is the anger and the rage that you have towards the other, when you do these acts, is slowly paying it back. It's lessening the anger and frustration that's in you if they wronged you. Then, that is a way of paying that debt. Or the inverse is true. The second option is you could forgive them. But what happens when you forgive them? You then are incurring the debt. They're not paying for it, but you are paying it back in the sense that you are having to take on that offense and the pain that happened. You're taking that into your person, and you're allowing it to slowly dissolve. That is still an act of paying the debt.

This idea of substitution that we, in the modern world, have such a hard time with is difficult, but let me just cast this to you. Every single act of forgiveness is an act of substitution in some form or another. Every time someone forgives, they are absorbing the pain and the hurt that was inflicted upon them, and they are substituting themselves as the one who pays the debt. Every act of forgiveness is an act of substitution in some form or another.

Take it back to Exodus. The debt had been there. The pain had been there. All of us are guilty of some debt, in which God is calling to task the debt that was and saying, "I have the right to all firstborns. It can either be the Egyptian boy, or it can be the lamb." There's a substitute available. The principle is that if you try to meet judgment on your own, you will fail. You cannot live up to this judgment on your own ability. To withstand judgment, you must come under the blood of the Lamb.

God creates a way in which the justice and the mercy still held in tension is offering itself together. The justice of God in that a debt has occurred and must be paid. The mercy is there is a way in which God will accept the substitution of a lamb as the act that absorbs that brokenness, that pays for that debt.

This is the purpose of the Passover. It's a picture of God leading his people out of the house of bondage and into a different life. But it's only through the blood of the Lamb. If you're familiar with the story, you'll recognize that God will, in fact, accept that substitution.

It's through that the people are liberated. Don't miss that for Israel; there was a very real need for liberation from the evil tyranny of Pharaoh. When they came under the same judgment, it was God saying, "Yes, this is important and essential and cannot be missed, but there's also a deeper liberation that's needed." We need this liberation from a spiritual debt that has been created.

What happens after this meal is God takes the people into the wilderness and begins to teach them how to be a new people. Because it was one thing to get Israel out of Egypt, it's a whole other thing to get Egypt out of Israel, to be someone different. A different people who are healed by the blood of the Lamb and then live in a different direction. That's what the rest of the Book of Exodus is about. How do we heal these people at that core level to become something different so we don't become the oppressor from which we've been liberated?

Let's return to the meal, the central element of our faith. This meal, which has become known as Passover, reminds us of this particular night. Here's the great irony is that the firstborn Son of God, Jesus Christ, was Israel's substitution. He is our substitution. The irony of all of this is whether or not you are settled on this difficult text about who God is and about how God operates within the world.

The reality is this Jesus in the Passover became the Egyptian firstborn. So whether or not we're comfortable with the way God

operates here, you cannot bypass the fact that God does not stand back and do this from a distance. He enters into the story, looks at his people, and says, "I will become that Egyptian firstborn." He will subject himself to the very act which God carried out in Egypt. One commentator said,

"Israel must never forget the terrible means by which the redemption was enacted. The sacrifice of the Passover Lamb is a constant reminder to Israel that their life came from death. The meal is that reminder every time we sit down for a meal that from death comes life."

We recognize the need for the ultimate liberation from sin; we believe that the beloved firstborn Son of God, who is the perfect sacrifice, who is also without blemish, who died at twilight, all of these things, pinging intentional markers of the story of Exodus coming back into fruition at this table with Jesus. So, on the night that Jesus was betrayed, it makes sense that the night before he's arrested and killed, he celebrates the Passover feast. He comes to the Passover feast with this meal being so central to the Jewish identity for years. Generation after generation, they sit and prepare to celebrate the Passover.

It's the height of Jesus' tension and drama. He's hours from being arrested and crucified, and he slows down and pauses to enjoy a meal with his disciples. It's at this meal where they would have celebrated before, where they sit around a table, and Jesus takes the role of the one who's presiding over the meal. He begins to walk through a liturgy, the very liturgy we saw in Exodus 12 and 13, in which there were steps in participating in this meal to remember the acts of God in Exodus.

Jesus, as he's eating this meal, comes to this place in Matthew 26, where it says, "*While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'Take and eat; this is my body'*" (Matthew 26:26) This meal had regular practices that would take place, such as when you arrived at the bread, the one who presided over would say, "This is the bread of our affliction," and it was a moment in the meal that symbolized the story in Exodus. The presider of the meal would say something to the effect of: this reminds us of the affliction of our ancestors, and we are free because they substituted themselves for us. Their affliction, their death has brought about life. And so the bread symbolizes the bread of affliction.

But when Jesus took the bread, he broke it and said, "This is my body," the disciples were shocked because it was not the affliction of their ancestors. It's Jesus saying it is no longer their affliction. "It is my affliction through which you get life. It is my body broken for you."

Then he goes on and there'd be another part of the liturgy in which multiple cups of wine would be taking place at the meal. There was at least four that we know of. These four cups of

wine symbolized the redemption promise. They would be things around sanctification, deliberation, redemption, and praise.

All of these different cups had symbolism about the Exodus Passover story. It would have brought all their minds back to Exodus 12. In Matthew 26, we read,

**Then he, [Jesus] took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."
Matthew 26:27-28**

Jesus takes this symbol that was meant to be about a meal back in Exodus 12 and says, "This is my body broken for you. This is my blood poured out for you." I can't help but think that all of a sudden the disciples remembered all of these stories and meals they'd had for generations. They began to come into view and get this laser focus in which they understand what Jesus is saying, that he is the Passover Lamb.

He is both the lamb and the Egyptian firstborn wrapped into one. He is the one who was sacrificed on our behalf. He is the one who took on the bread of affliction. But there's a third element that we should see in the story of the communion in Matthew. It's the one that's been most obvious this whole time.

What did the instructions in Exodus 12 begin with but the roasted lamb? It's odd that there is no reference to the lamb in Matthew 26 other than when you put together that Jesus himself was the lamb. The reason there's no reference to the lamb is because the Lamb was the very one who was breaking the bread and pouring out the wine.

It was Jesus himself who was the slaughtered Lamb. The one which is covering the blood of all those there. He is giving all of our lives that covering in which we go from death to life. It's the death of Jesus, that Lamb, that gives us life. Is it any wonder that at the beginning of John 1:29, the text that I opened with, our call to worship in which John the Baptist, who's this grisly prophet, who is constantly pointing to Jesus, that in chapter 1 of John, when he gets and sees the vision of Jesus and the Messiah, he bursts out, saying, the next day, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world!"

It's John the Baptist who finally recognizes that Jesus is the Passover Lamb. He's the one we've been waiting for, who brings about all of that liberation. It's Jesus, who is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. It's the judgment that was on all of us who created this debt, and we cannot pay it back. It's there that God says that Jesus functions as that Lamb without defect. It is Jesus who is the Lamb of God. Every single meal that

you partake in, you have the opportunity to remember that from death comes life. The sacred and the ordinary mashed up into something as simple as brunch.

That is at the very center of our faith because we participate in this meal like generation after generation has celebrated the Lord's Supper. We gather around tables and hear those words, "This is the body of Christ broken for you." The bread of affliction that was due to us in that we had created a debt. Jesus says, "I will absorb that, and in that my affliction will give life to you."

The same redemption that was met and symbolized in those cups is brought here now by the blood of Christ poured out for you. The invitation before all of us is to behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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Catalog No.1484-7FC