

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by The Rev. Jan Lamb on Sunday, September 4, 2011.

Proper 18 Exodus 12:1-4, Romans 13:8-14, Matthew 18:15-20

Moses was a busy man. In last week's reading he was told by God, "I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." And today, nine plagues later, God has Moses orchestrate a logistical nightmare in order that the Israelites might be prepared for the next – and hopefully the last – plague that will persuade Pharaoh to release the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.

Moses had to tell the entire nation of Israel that they each had to, first, take a perfect year-old lamb on the 10th of the month, then slaughter it on the 14th of the month at twilight, roast it with bitter herbs according to a very specific recipe, immediately dispose of all leftovers, and eat it while they were dressed and ready to go ...hurriedly. Oh, and by the way, put some of the lamb's blood on your doorposts and lintel or the angel of death will kill your first born.

I can't imagine anyone standing in front of this congregation of less than 100 people [just over 100 people] giving those instructions and expecting anyone to take them seriously. Someone in the congregation would think they had a better roasted lamb recipe -- there's a great one in the parish cookbook, you know. Someone else always hates to be in a hurry and just can't eat if rushed. And someone else would check the Google calendar on their iPhone and note that there was a conference call set for the 14th at twilight – so can I pencil you in for the 15th?

Very conservative estimates put the population of Israelites at this time at around 20 to 40,000 men. Then, of course there are the women and children.... That's a lot of people to expect to follow such specific instructions on short notice.

All these actions were to be performed with urgency. The time is at hand! You don't even have time to wait for the bread to rise. You have to be ready to go at a moment's notice. What God is about to do is decisive. This is the climax of the plagues against Egypt. Death will only pass over those homes with door posts painted with blood and will enter the homes of the rest – even Pharaoh – to strike dead their firstborn. This powerful act will free the Hebrew people from slavery.

God had tried nine previous times with a variety of plagues – turning the water of the Nile into blood, frogs, gnats, flies, diseased livestock, --- I would have long since given in if I were Pharaoh – boils, hail, locusts, and darkness. But through all of these, Pharaoh's heart remained hardened. He still refused to let the Hebrews go. God had given Pharaoh enough chances, been patient enough. There was only one plague left – the plague of death, the pouring out of blood.

We who grow pale and weak-kneed at the sight of blood, often have trouble with the verse, "The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you..." Why, we ask, was blood on the doorposts the sign? Wasn't there something else they could have used? Perhaps some hay tacked above the windows or some mud smeared on the door or a neatly lettered sign could have announced, "Hebrews live here." But no, God demanded blood as a sign. It is the blood of that lamb that makes the difference. It serves as a sign for all to the Israelites, but more importantly a sign for Yahweh, who will see the blood and pass over the houses of the Israelites. To set the Hebrews free, God required blood. This was decisive. And only through it could the people be released from their bondage. This seems harsh and radical to us, but it shows us the extent to which God will go to redeem His people and set them free.

God gave Moses a long list of specific details to convey to his people. It required considerable precision about killing, cooking and eating a lamb, about preparing a special meal, with no time to spare. This meal is the beginning of a whole new identity for this nation, the People of God. “This month shall mark for you the beginning of months.” It’s a whole new beginning for a people who needed a “do-over”. They were the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – the children and inheritors of the Promise of God, the Covenant – and they had been reduced to brick making slaves. They needed something to help them begin to break away from everything they knew and to start over. Life on the other side of the divided sea, on the other side of slavery, would be completely different, and they were going to do it together, with the help of God.

This meal would begin to form them into a new kind of people. And the fact that God would ask them to have this meal over and over again for ages to come would solidify their new identity. Until, of course, the people of God would need another do-over. Until many generations later, there would be another firstborn son. He would be born in Bethlehem to a woman named Mary. She would name her son “Jesus”. He would become the sacrificial lamb for all people, not just Hebrews, but all the world, even for those Egyptians. His blood would be poured out, and it gives us life.

And so, on the night before Jesus died, he came to the table with his friends to have this meal again and offered his own Body and Blood. As Christians we remember God’s act of love in our celebration of the Eucharist. This meal was the beginning of a new identity for the followers of the Son of God; this meal forms us into a new kind of people. In the drinking of the cup, we spread the blood of the lamb, the blood of Jesus, on the doorposts of our hearts. We do it in the belief and assurance that God acts decisively for us in Jesus Christ as he did for the Hebrews on that Passover night. This meal which we celebrate here – and have for generations -- means liberation for all who partake, release from sin. It is open to all the Lord invited, every class, every age, every race, every gender, sinners included, who remember Christ our Passover was sacrificed for us. The blood of the host at this banquet means God will pass over the sins of those who partake, forgiving us and freeing us. The blood of Christ, the cup of salvation....

The good news as always is that the Christian life is a journey, and as Paul knew well, we are not at its end. Although forgiven and free, we’re not perfected; we’re just on the way. Paul’s message to the church at Rome contains a sense of urgency much like that faced by the Israelites. “...it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep...the night is gone, the day is near.” As the Israelites put blood on their doorposts as a sign of their trust in God, we “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” as a sign of our faith and trust in God. We too are marked by blood; by the blood shed by Jesus. Putting on Jesus means we are different from others; we stand up and we stand out. Paul told the early churches in Rome and other places that we are to live our lives in response to God’s gracious gift to us, to the world. To Paul it seemed clear that if you live your life as if you are going to meet God face to face at any time, if you live your life confident that God’s kingdom has begun, if you live your life knowing the relationship you have with God is more important than anything else, if you live your life that way, then your behavior should reflect that this is what you believe. It wasn’t about doing something right in order to win God’s approval – Paul would never say that our actions win us salvation – it was about faith, faith in God’s actions, faith in God’s love, and faith in God’s steadfast relationship with us. Faith is not just believing. Faith is also about doing, acting and working in God’s kingdom here and now, doing the work of Christ in the place where we are, responding to that free gift of God’s love that we can do nothing to earn, but that we can do everything to share.

But what about us, St. Luke’s, on this day, in this place? As we approach a new program year here at St. Luke’s, a month of new beginnings, acting on your faith and working in God’s

kingdom could mean looking to participate in a new ministry – maybe joining the faithful team that works with IHN providing safe, temporary shelter for homeless families in our community; it might mean buying a few more chemically treated mosquito nets so that Nets for Life can save even more lives in sub-Saharan Africa. Responding to God's free gift of love might include volunteering to work a shift at the Fall Fling in a few weeks, or learning a story for Godly Play. There might be a special meal that you could attend like the upcoming Neighborhood Dinners or maybe a special meal you could prepare for someone who is sick or otherwise struggling. Sharing God's love can include a phone call or card to someone you haven't seen for awhile at church, the offer of a ride or a sincere smile.

Faith, hope and love, all gifts from God, are warm and constant companions in the midst of an often cold and confusing world. If we live in the midst of these gifts, if we live as if there is no time to waste, if we live as if we must be ready to go on short notice, if we live as if it is urgent to act on our faith, to tell of our hope in word and deed, and to show our love for our neighbor, then we would be putting on Jesus. *Amen*