

Mo Blessings Mo Problems Sermon Series
Passed Over by God - Exodus 12:1-14
June 15, 2025
Rev. Dr. Kory Wilcoxson

You remember those decisions you make that at the time sound like a great idea? Like that decision to sign up for bungee-jumping on your next vacation, or that decision to see if tin foil can be microwaved. That's kind of the way I feel about choosing to preach on this passage a few months ago. "Sure! The Passover will be an interesting scripture. I'm sure I'll come up with a clever way to talk about God killing all the first-born sons in Egypt." To quote Ron Burgundy when he jumps in the bear exhibit at the zoo in the movie, "Anchorman," "I immediately regret this decision!"

Before we deal with this passage, let's get caught up on what's happened since last week's story. When we left Moses, he was hemming and hawing at God's call for him to go to Egypt and confront Pharaoh. After Moses turns aside to see the burning bush, God calls him to be a deliverer of the people of Israel from slavery. Moses churns out a bunch of excuses, but ultimately God – "I am who I am" is the name God gives – persuades Moses that he is indeed the man for the job. You could say that God the father made him an offer he couldn't refuse.

So, Moses and his brother Aaron go to Egypt and meet with Pharaoh, who not only doesn't free the Israelites from slavery, but actually gives them more work. Moses complains to God, "Why did you send me to do this if it's not going to work?" God says, "I've got this." That starts a series of 10 plagues that God sends to Egypt, each one a little more extreme than the last and designed to force Pharaoh into giving the Israelites their freedom. The plagues included boils, frogs, gnats, cicadas, mosquitos, people not using turn signals on their camels, and unsolicited calls about your chariot's extended warranty. Can you believe the Pharaoh still didn't give in after all that?

Finally, God announces the 10th plague, which will be the murder of the first-born sons of all the Egyptians, from the lowliest slave to Pharaoh himself. And what vagabond criminal will do this murdering. Well...verse 29 says, "At midnight the Lord struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the prisoner who was in the dungeon and all the firstborn of the livestock." So, there's that.

Let's deal with this, because we can't hear the rest of the story unless we get some kind of explanation here. Why would God kill children to free the Israelites? I wish I had an easy answer. I wish I could wave an interpretive wand and explain away this horrific part of scripture. But I can't. I know people who choose not to have faith because they refuse to believe in a God who would do this. Well, so do I. I don't believe in this characterization of God. Can you make sense of a God who sends nine increasingly damaging plagues that affect a lot of innocent people, and then promises to kill a bunch of children to punished one hard-headed pharaoh? That doesn't sound like the God I believe in.

So how do I reconcile this? I try to make sense of it by telling myself that this is simply a literary technique, an embellishment or hyperbole, used by the writer to explain how God dealt with Pharaoh's evil oppression of God's people. I tell myself that back in those days, the people understood God to work this way, and that it was a much more violent, primitive society. I tell myself there can be an ocean of difference between how people think God acts and how God actually acts. I tell myself those things to help me process this story, but it's still right there in the Bible, and each time I read it I have to live with the discomfort it causes. There are some things

in the Bible to which I simply say, “I don’t believe this,” and this story is one of them. But despite my discomfort, the narrative continues, and I have to trust that God is speaking to me, even through the most disturbing parts of the Bible.

In the midst of announcing this 10th plague to Moses, God pauses the story to give the instructions we read today. It’s a peculiar piece of scripture because of the level of detail it gives. Who gets what portion of the lamb, how it is to be cooked, what you’re supposed to wear while eating it. This would be an easy part of the story to gloss over, to explain away as archaic or primitive. And it is. But it’s not.

The first thing God does in the instruction is he changes the Israelites’ understanding of time: “This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you.” Do you get the significance of what God is doing here? It’s as if God came to us today and said, “OK, timeout! From now on, June 15 is going to be the first day of the year.” God is basically hitting the reset button the whole Jewish calendar. God is saying, “Today is the first day of the rest of your lives.”

If you’ve ever golfed, you know the term “mulligan.” If you hit a shot and it goes horribly wrong, then you can take a mulligan, a second shot, that won’t count against you. I usually take three or four mulligans per hole until I get a shot I like. Or, as a kid, while you were playing a game, did you ever call for a do-over? You’re playing kickball, you make an out, but you hit the reset button by shouting, “Do-over!”

In our story, God is taking a mulligan. God is calling for a do-over. This moment in time, this exodus from Egypt, marks a new chapter in the lives of God’s people. No longer will they be slaves in Egypt; no longer will they be held captive by Pharaoh. From this day forward, they will be free, and God marks that by restarting the calendar. From now on, every time this part of the year comes around, the Hebrews will remember the Exodus, when God called for a do-over in God’s relationship with the Israelites.

There’s something very special about the way God wants this day to be remembered. All the details spelled out in the passage are important because subsequent generations will be expected to do the same things as a way of remembering. If you’ve ever attended a Passover meal, you know they still use the bitter herbs and the unleavened bread. When a Jewish family celebrates this meal, they are not only remembering it; they are enacting it. They are participating in the Exodus all over again, so that the meaning of the original Exodus is real for them today.

We also have a meal we re-enact. Ours is on a weekly basis. And part of the re-enactment ceremony is the repetition of the words said at that first meal, which took place during the celebration of the Passover. On the night he was betrayed, Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and said, “Take and eat, this is my body, broken for you.” Likewise, after supper, he took the cup, and after blessing it he shared it with the disciples saying, “This is my blood of the new covenant, poured out for many for the forgiveness of their sins. As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, do so in remembrance of me.”

Like the words of scripture we read this morning, those words are our instructions on how to enact this meal. When we come to the table, we don’t just read those words and hold up the elements for you to see. We share them, we pass them through the midst of the congregation, we drink and eat just like they drank and ate at that meal in the Upper Room. As we re-enact that meal, we participate in it ourselves, we experience the meaning of that meal anew in our own lives, we bring to life the promises Christ made to us at that first meal.

What are those promises? The same thing the Israelites celebrated at the Passover. Freedom. Freedom from the captivity to sin. Freedom from the voices, external and internal, that tell us we're alone, we're not loved, we're not good enough. Freedom from the world's expectations and pressures. Freedom from fear. Freedom from who we used to be.

But the Exodus and the Last Supper were not just about freedom from something. They were and are about freedom for something. We are freed to be the people God created us to be. We are freed to live out the call God has placed in our hearts. We are freed to treat people as God wants us to treat them, not as the world says we should. At this table, just as at the Passover, we celebrate both our "freedom from" and our "freedom for." Each time you approach the table, ask yourself: what are you being freed from? What are you being freed for?

That's the significance of ritual. Passover is celebrated every year so Jews will remember what God has done for them. We celebrate this meal each week so we remember what God has done for us. The more we do this, the more familiar it becomes, the more it becomes a part of us. And that's important in today's world, where most of us probably know 10 commercial jingles better than we know any verses of scripture besides "Jesus wept." We need to hear this story over and over and over again until it becomes a part of us, until the words roll off our tongues, until we start to actually believe the message we hear about being loved and accepted and forgiven. It's a message I know I need to hear each week, because at some point in the past seven days, I've forgotten. Each time we come to the table, we get a do-over. God loves us more than our mistakes, our errors, our unfaithfulness.

Our faith is not a memorial to something that occurred back then, but it's a living faith that witnesses to what Christ is doing now in our lives and in our world. We continue to live out the mulligan we've been given. And as we do, we keep alive the stories of the Exodus and the Last Supper, stories which resonate down through history with the words, "God is with you. God has not forgotten you. God loves you." We need to remember how we got here, the sacrifices that were made, the courage that was shown.

The Passover reminds us that before God ever came to earth as a little baby in a manger, before Jesus ever held up a loaf of bread and a cup, God came to the Israelites enslaved in Egypt and set them free. Do we take that freedom for granted? When we come to this table, do we remember the sacrifice that was made so that we may know new life? It's a gift we are called to live out every day. You're not who you used to be. God has given you a do-over. And, when you fall short this coming week, this table will be here next Sunday, waiting for you, calling to you, reminding you of what God has done and what God is doing. Where in your life do you need a do-over? Come, the table is ready.