



July 19, 2020
Rev. Dr. Mark J. Toone

The Exodus: Passed Over

Exodus 12:21-32

Good morning Chapel Hill! In case you don't recognize me, I'm Pastor Mark Toone...and this is my new mandatory face-covering! Just kidding. I'm wearing my face mask; I just took it off to preach. We are working hard to keep everyone safe here in our building...including our kids who resumed meeting today. AND we are working hard to respect the rights of each individual as you decide what is necessary to protect your health and the health of others.

But I have to say, it is so GREAT to speak to a room with people in it! Welcome! And, for those of you not yet able to worship in-person, welcome to YOU, too! I'm so grateful that we can stay connected virtually. And when you are able to return...we'll be waiting for you!

We continue this morning in our journey through Exodus...and it is so timely. We are fighting a global plague. And as we saw last week, God sent a series of plagues against Egypt to secure his people's freedom and, more importantly, to declare God's sovereignty. We need to be reminded that God is STILL sovereign! The first nine plagues were a frontal assault against the Egyptian gods...Egyptian idolatry

But...what about the tenth plague? What Egyptian god is under attack here? Well...the most visible god of all: Pharaoh. Pharaoh was believed to be the incarnate son of Amun-Ra, the greatest of Egyptian gods. But stubborn, hard-hearted Pharaoh, is about to have his heart broken.

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 captive who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock....And there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was not a house where someone was not dead. (Exodus 12: 29-30)

COVID-19 has not played favorites. It strikes young and old, rich and poor, famous and obscure, religious and irreligious. That was also true of many of the plagues against Egypt. Five of the plagues afflicted the Israelites as well as the Egyptians. SOMETIMES God's people are called to endure hardship. SOMETIMES, God uses crisis to drive his people to their knees, to call them to repentance, to draw them back to himself. Perhaps that is God's purpose in this moment...to draw his people back to himself! My prayer is that this crisis will not be wasted! That WE will be driven to our knees, that WE will cry out in repentance for our own idolatry, that WE will be drawn closer to the Lord than we were when times were good and we didn't think we needed God so much. Well...we need him now. Has this changed your heart yet?

Sometimes...Christians suffer right along with the unbelieving world. But SOMETIMES, God delivers his people. That happened with the tenth plague. Exodus tells us that “the destroyer” went through Egypt at midnight, striking down every firstborn child. It must have been horrific. Can you imagine the weeping and wailing from every single household? Never had a cry of lament been heard in Egypt as on this night when the death angel came calling.

But what about the Hebrew people? What happened to them on that horrible night? Well...God had a different plan; a plan to save them. BUT God’s salvation required something of his people. For them to be spared, they were going to have to hear...and obey. Listen. (Ex 12:1 ff...)

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt,“ This month shall be for you the beginning of months....Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month every man shall take a lamb according to their fathers' houses, a lamb for a household. And if the household is too small for a lamb, then he and his nearest neighbor shall take according to the number of persons...Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male a year old....and you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs at twilight.

“Then they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat the flesh that night, roasted on the fire; with unleavened bread and bitter herbs they shall eat it... It is the Lord's Passover. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt; and 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 are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt.

This crisis was a defining moment for the people of Israel. God was about to deliver them from 430 years of bondage. After centuries of oppression...after nine plagues where Pharaoh had a chance to repent and save Egypt...but in every instance hardened his heart... God was about to bring his most devastating judgment. And in this moment, the people of Israel were reborn. In fact, according to verse 2, God told them to start a new calendar with a new month. It’s like He was saying, “We are LITERALLY starting all over again.”

On vacation, I told Cyndi, “I’m 63 years-old...and I feel like I’m starting all over again.” Of course...I was exaggerating....and whining. We are not starting all over...although we are certainly learning new ways of being the Church. But in this case, it WAS true. A literal, brand new start that would unify God’s people. However the centuries of oppression had broken them down...however it had fragmented and dispirited them...in this moment, they were all brought together.

Moses gave God’s message to the entire “congregation.” Every household would do the same thing. They would splash their doors with the blood of the lamb. They would make themselves

conspicuous. Conspicuous to a culture that was mistreating them and hated them. But more importantly, conspicuous to the Lord. In this act, they declared they belonged to God...they were marked by the blood of the lamb...and they were going to trust him for their salvation.

The longer COVID drags on, the more essential it is, in my opinion, for the followers of Jesus, to be conspicuous about our hope in Christ. Conspicuous to our fellow believers as we reassure one another...and conspicuous to our unbelieving family and friends about our confidence in a sovereign God who IS in control, regardless of the uncertainty and confusion stirred up by the media. Is there ANYTHING conspicuously Christian about the way you are facing this crisis? The way you pray, the way you trust, the way you demonstrate contentment, the way you hold your tongue or the way you speak up, the way you take a courageous stand when you perceive untruth...or defy the culture of fear? Is there ANYTHING conspicuously Christian about YOUR response to COVID? Where people say, "Wow...look at that?"

One way that we as a church could be conspicuous would be to not hoard our resources in a time when we might be tempted to do just that. For instance, I've been asking this question of myself as your pastor: What does a large church with a large building do when we can't USE the building as we once did? (A building, by the way, that because of your faithfulness might be paid off by the end of this year! Well done, Chapel Hill!)

Only months ago, this building hosted thousands gathered in our various rooms every week. Now, at least for the time being, our gatherings are smaller and restricted. We look forward to the day when everything is opened back up, but meantime...what do we do with this huge resource that God has given to us, a resource that is largely sitting empty?

Verse 4 inspired me: And if the household is too small for a lamb, then he and his nearest neighbor shall take according to the number of persons; according to what each can eat you shall make your count for the lamb...

I read this and thought of those churches in Gig Harbor meeting in school buildings who are suddenly homeless. They have no place to gather. It struck me, "Here is an opportunity for the Body of Christ to come together. What if Chapel Hill offered it's building to homeless churches in our community until they can get back on their feet? Just like the neighbor in Exodus who said, "Here... share our lamb... share our meal... share our home."

The Devil would like nothing more than for this plague to close down churches, to set back the work of the gospel, to discourage believers, to throw pastors out of work and crush their sense of call. We are certainly not living in a culture that is encouraging or appreciative of what we do. We are not considered an "essential" industry. We are not granted the same privileges as other similar organizations. We are often labelled as "Super Spreaders." It is not surprising to hear experts predict that, by the time this pandemic lifts, thousands of churches will be closed down.

Well...what if something else happened in Gig Harbor? What if we shared our building? And smaller churches had a chance to survive. And even thrive. What if the non-believing community caught wind of this and said, "Look how those Christians love each other and care for each other. Look how they come together in this time of crisis. Maybe the church DOES matter to this community. Maybe the people of faith ARE an essential part of who we are."

Well...your elders voted Thursday night to extend this offer to the "homeless" churches in our community. We don't know how it will work or who will take us up on the offer. But we are going to invite homeless churches to use our building. At the very least, this will unite as a Christian community in defiance of a plague that the Devil would use to tear down the Kingdom...but which the Holy Spirit can use to GROW the kingdom.

You see, WE too are marked people. Just like the doors of those Israelite homes were marked with the blood of the Passover lamb, WE have been marked by the blood of the perfect Passover Lamb. Exodus gives us a glimpse 1200 years into the future when a man named John the Baptist spotted his cousin, Jesus of Nazareth, and cried out, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

When Jesus gathered for his Last Supper with his disciples...what was that supper? Passover! The meal from this story. When Jesus' broke the bread and poured out the wine, he CLAIMED this ritual as his own by declaring, "This is MY body broken for you and my blood shed for you."

And the next day when Jesus was crucified...as his blood flowed onto that cross...THAT blood became OUR protection from OUR Destroyer. To the outsider, all this talk about the blood of Jesus can seem bizarre. We sing hymns like, "There's Power in the Blood" and unchurched people say, "What are you talking about?" Well...the New Testament reminds us repeatedly that there IS something powerful about the sacrificial blood of Christ. "In Christ we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins," says Ephesians 1. "...without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness," says Hebrews 9.

Every human being possesses a virus far deadlier than COVID. It is called "sin." We sometimes think of sin as those naughty things we know we shouldn't do but do anyway. But sin is far more virulent. A better way to think about sin IS to imagine it as the most deadly, merciless virus ever to infect a human body. Every one of us has it. And if we ignore it...if we let it run its course...it will have the same effect on every person. It will kill us, spiritually. It will steal our peace, our joy, our lives and separate us from God and the Promised Land he offers.

That is bad news...truly bad news. But the good news is, there IS a cure for that virus. The antibodies found in the shed blood of Christ. The blood which HE spread upon the crossbeam and the upright of that horrible instrument of death.

On this day of worship...in this act of communion...we receive, once again, the mark of the Lamb upon ourselves. We receive, once again, the protection only Jesus can offer. We receive, once again, the reminder that we are a part of a larger people...of EVERY congregation that claims the name of Christ. And we receive, once again, the Holy Spirit of Christ who empowers us to live a faithful, peace-filled, conspicuous witness...even in a plague.

I promised you two surprises. This was one; here's the second: Cyndi and I are going to be grandparents! Cooper and Deb are going to have a baby sometime in late autumn. Naturally...we could not be more excited. And naturally...from now on, my sermons are going to be packed with illustrations about the most beautiful, incredible, gifted child EVER to be born on this earth. And would you like to know the gender of the baby? Well...you'll have to come back to my next sermon!