

The Challenge of the Table

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Rituals are important. They have coalesced communities and have tied generations together. In the scripture today, we have the Hebrew slaves about to embark on a life-changing journey. Those who begin will not reach their destination. They are about to realize their dream of freedom which will by no means be simple or direct. They will leave their birthplace and all that they know to travel into the wilderness. Will it be better or worse than their present situation? Are they doing this great upheaval for themselves or for their future children and grandchildren? In moments before their departure, where you know second thoughts are rising to the surface, God takes the time to give, painstakingly, Moses and his brother Aaron instructions of how to mark the occasion. Not only for this moment in time but for all time and for those future generations that are yet to come. Considering the people are on the brink to run for their lives in escape, they take this time to give in almost absurd detail how to remember what God is doing for them.

Listen for God's Word from the book of Exodus chapter 12:

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: ²This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. ³Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. ⁴If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. ⁵Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. ⁶You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. ⁷They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. ⁸They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. ⁹Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. ¹⁰You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. ¹¹This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the LORD. ¹²For I will pass through the

land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. ¹³The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. ¹⁴This 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.

This is the Word of the Lord **Thanks be to God**

It happened. The people left Egypt with God's help. The people wandered in the wilderness for a generation. The people organized into a nation and that nation rose and fell, was conquered and dispersed. That nation lost their homes and homeland. More than once, those people reached toward the brink of extinction at the hands of others. Yet, not only the people but the instructions given to Moses and Aaron survived and are repeated and recounted throughout the world every year at the time of Passover. Traditions and rituals remain and are repeated because they tie us together when all kinds of forces try to break us a part. It does not mean there are not challenges in following the direction given so long ago. How do you celebrate Passover in a concentration camp? How do you kill a lamb without blemish during a famine? How do you celebrate as a family during a pandemic? Adjustments are made while keeping in place the meaning of God's presence in very difficult situations.

The Passover is the foundation for this table before us. The Communion table is the center of worship for Christians throughout the world and throughout time. In the book of Exodus, we get instructions about how to remember this meal before us. This is my body broken for you...this is the new promise of my blood shed for you. From the day of Jesus' last meal, forward to the present. We remember with words and acts, two meals, millennia apart that remind us of what God has done. God has taken the Hebrews from slavery and delivered them to a land of their own so that they can live in freedom. God has given a Son so that we might live free from the sins that constrain us and in the light of God's love.

Like the people of Israel, we too face challenges that keep us from gathering around this table. What do we do when we are far from each other? Do these visible tangible things like bread and wine simply get relegated to a memory? What happens when we cannot worship in our churches in person? Do all of you simply become bystanders rather than participants? Today, sharing this

sacrament of communion is a challenge. It is not what we are used to. We will not have the elders come forward and pass the bread and juice to each of us. We will not have people come down the aisles to take a piece of bread or a sip of the cup and worry about the sanitation of it all. We continue to remember the act and to pass it forward to those who come after us.

What did the Jews do when they were dispersed into foreign lands where the language, the culture and the relationships were so different? How did they get their bearings when their world was turned upside down? What did the faithful Jews do when they were in hiding from the Nazi's and could not openly celebrate the killing of the lamb which they were to share with neighbors? Could they sing their hymns when people might hear and turn them in to the authorities? What kind of table did the Jewish immigrants gather round in the tenements in New York when all was so different?

Keeping the Passover, fulfilling God's direction throughout the years has not been easy, but continues to be passed down to each new generation.

What did the early Christians do when they wanted to remember the meal that Jesus had with his disciples when they were hiding in fear of the Romans? What did they do when rumors surrounded them? These followers of Christ actually ate someone's body and drank the blood. How do Christians today in countries that have other dominate religions not friendly to Christianity, celebrate communion and remember Christ's word to his disciples? I wonder how my father-in-law, a naval chaplain during World War II, shared communion as sailors were heading off to the Pacific?

Throughout history, Christian and Jews had to adapt to change the way they remembered the significant moments in their faith. They faced challenges in how they share the story of their faith. Throughout time both Jews and Christians had to adapt to how they recounted the significant acts of their faith so that the next generation would know and tell those who came after them.

No matter what the table looks like, a blanket on the ground, in a prison cell, or on the Space Station, the fact is we act in God's name. As a result, these actions, the Passover and our Communion, survive and are shared. It is the promise that is for us and for our future. It is an affirmation of God's presence with us. God was present during the dark days of the Hebrews and their escape to freedom. God was present in the dark night before Jesus' arrest. God is present with us today. God's presence continues through plagues and pogrom, indifference and

abuse. This sacrament of Communion has been sung and spoken in great rooms of beauty and grandeur and in intimate places of hiding. Young and old in retreats, camps and cathedrals have shared it. It has come down through one generation at a time.

We face the challenge of the table. We face this table with only a few people in this sacred place. We face the table of communion that draws us together as a community of faith with our doors closed and a red light telling me we are recording. I do so with a faith that has stretched me further than I can even imagine. That is why we ask you to take a moment, set this time a part; take the bread, take the cup and share in this sacred meal that is not ours but given to us by the one who knows us and knows our pain. God' Son, Jesus. This act of communion is stronger than a deadly virus and is more durable than our politically charged world. What nourishes us goes beyond bricks and walls of a building. Once we are nourished, we are able to share our faith in ways that shows others a better way. We know we are members of Christ's body in this world. We can share that love with neighbor and stranger, friend and foe. We adapt and we improvise and we tell the story of God's amazing love for us as we share this meal together.

My dear friend of over 50 years told me about her Passover meal this year. Normally they would share the Passover around their dining room table in Florida with friends and neighbors. People would bring the traditional dishes plus some new ones that fit their 21st century tastes. This year, gathering around the table for the Seder meal took some improvising. This year, they connected via zoom with her sisters and family in Chicago and Baltimore and with her niece Katie, in Sydney Australia. They sat around their own tables and shared the Passover Seder. Even Katie ate the meal and drank the wine not minding that it was 7:00 am her time in Australia! They ended over time zones and continents with the traditional toast, "Next year Jerusalem!"

We don't know what next year will hold. We don't know what next month will bring. But we continue to tell of God's mighty acts and God's presence with us. We continue to be a living church beyond these walls. We continue to share in Christ's words and take the bread together. We continue to share the cup even when we can't pass it to each other. And most of all in our hearts we continue to gather. We do so not only for our own sake but for the sake of our children, grandchildren and all who come after us. Thanks be to God for being present wherever we may be. Amen.