

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner
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Woodhaven Presbyterian Church
Rally Day / Kick-Off Sunday
Exodus 12:1-14, 26-27

The Importance of our Story

The modest house was getting dark. Night was beginning to fall. The small family living within its walls consisted of a husband, a wife, and two little girls. There had been a baby boy, once. But thanks to Pharaoh's command, the baby boy returned to God shortly after his birth. The waters of the Nile replaced the waters of the womb. The family tried not to think too much about him. It was all too recent. It was all too painful. Instead, they focused on what was next. And now, on that evening, the ritual was next. Moses and Aaron had instructed all of the Israelite slaves as to what they were to do that night¹.

The parents went outside, back to the corner of the yard to meet the parents from next door. The girls were told to stay inside the house. They heard the bleating of the lamb, the one they had grown to love, only a year old. His bleating reached a heartbreaking crescendo, and then they heard no more. Quickly, the parents came back in with their household's share.

The fire was made outside. The lamb roasted. Bitter herbs mixed with it. Bread made without leaven for there was no time for yeast. All was done with great expediency. No one sat down. Small knapsacks were packed with the things they could not leave behind—the baby boy's receiving blanket, the little girl's corn husk doll, the few pieces of money they had saved from all those hours of backbreaking work inflicted on them by their Egyptian taskmasters.

One of the daughters walked outside and peered up at the doorway. She noticed the blood smeared on the doorposts, but she did not ask any questions. At least not yet. Her questions would come. As a matter of fact, as this meal would unfold year after year, the same ritual, the same food, the same peculiar and particular tradition, the children would be encouraged to ask why. "Why do we eat so quickly, papa? Why do we eat flat bread, mama? Why do we eat the herbs and the lamb?" And then her parents would remind her of the story.

They would remind her of the time in slavery and oppression. They would remind her of her brother's watery grave in the Nile. They would remind her how the LORD God heard their cries, passed over their home, and led them into freedom. The questions would come, as would the story, year after year. But for tonight, no one spoke much at all. They were too afraid. They did not know what the journey would be like. But they were ready. Loins girded, sandals on feet, staff in hand. Waiting. Waiting for the freedom ride. Waiting for their leader Moses to announce their departure.

Generations passed. Many, many generations. So many generations had passed that stories of slavery and brickmaking, stories of genocide and plagues, stories of wilderness and murmuring seemed far removed from their everyday lives. Some of the Israelites were now in positions of power and influence. Commerce was good and jobs were plentiful. Baby boys were born in hope, not in fear. No one needed to pack small knapsacks and leave them by the door. Sandals were typically removed at mealtime. The Israelites breathed deeply.

So many generations had passed since that first Passover night, that first Passover meal. Those stories often seemed so far removed from their everyday lives. Which is precisely why, every early Spring, the parents would gather the family together for the ritual of Passover worship. The fire was made. The lamb roasted. Bitter herbs mixed with it. Bread made without leaven. And as they walked through each aspect of the meal, a

meal that was growing in complexity and meaning throughout the years, the youngest child would ask questions.

“Why is this night different from all other nights?” the child would ask. “For we were once slaves in the land of Egypt,” his father responded, “But God heard our cries, set us free and led us through the wilderness to the land of milk and honey.” “On all other nights, we eat bread and matzah, why tonight do we only eat matzah?” the child would ask. “Because there was no time for the bread to rise. We had to eat hurriedly-- loins girded, sandals on our feet, staff in our hands. The Passover of the LORD was coming and we needed to be ready,” the father would answer.

And on those nights with the family gathered together; eating the same meal they had eaten for generations; asking the same questions they had asked for generations; worshiping in the same way they had worshiped for generations; as they sat and ate surrounded by such depth of feeling and such re-immersion into identity, they felt as if it had all happened just yesterday. They felt as if it were their own backs that had been stooped over by slavery. They felt as if it were their own baby boys snatched from their arms. They felt as if it were their own hearts beating with fear and anticipation over the long walk to freedom. On those nights, they felt as if it would be their house that the LORD would pass over; and their families who would be spared; and their souls that would finally find freedom and release and hope for a new day.

And every time they worshipped surrounded by such depth of feeling and such re-immersion into identity, they would also remember the words and warnings of the prophets. Responsibility walked hand in hand with freedom. They may be settled and free now, but they had once been slaves in Egypt’s land. They may hold positions of power and influence now, but they had once been so low that only the LORD could lift their heads.

And so after worship, they would look around at their world with new Passover eyes, and see all those still enslaved by poverty or circumstance. After worship, they would look around their world with new Passover eyes and seek out the widow and the orphan, those most vulnerable, so they might care for them just as God cared for them.

Their worship and their rituals would remind them that with their great freedom came great responsibility. And with each Passover meal, with each remembering and reenacting, with each moment of worship, their identity is sealed and deepened, and the covenant to be God’s people is renewed in each heart.

Generations passed. Many, many, many generations. So many generations passed that nations had risen and fallen in that time. And in a church fellowship hall in The Woodlands, Texas, a group of Presbyterians and a group of Reformed Jews sit at table together. The dishes are carefully laid out. Flat unleavened bread, matzah, sits in front of each small grouping of people. Horseradish, symbolizing the bitter herb, sits on a small plate. Kharoset, a paste of nuts and apples, is also placed in front. Cups of wine are poured. Jewish children and Christian children sit side by side, looking at it all, looking at us all, and you can see the questions forming in their minds.

The Rabbi and the preacher stand at the front. A young Jewish boy gets up, takes the microphone, and begins the ritual. “Why is this night different than all other nights?” he asks. And in response, the Rabbi tells the story. He talks about what happened so many years ago in their history as a people. He talks about the oppression, the slavery, the fear and the death. He talks about their cries and their pleading for freedom and justice. And then he hands the microphone to the Christian preacher. And she gets to tell the rest of the story.

She speaks about how God heard their cries and set them free. She explains why they eat the meal hurriedly, loins girded, staff in hand, sandals on feet. She talks about the bitter herbs that represent the bitterness of the Jewish servitude; and the kharoset, the paste of nuts and apples, that represents the mortar the slaves were

required to produce. And then she tells all the Christian boys and girls that this story is not just a Jewish story. It is also their story, our story, too. This story of slavery and freedom is also part of our heritage, our memory, our identity.

And then, the Rabbi leads them all through a rehearsal of the ten plagues. And with each plague listed, a drop of wine is spilled. Why? To recognize that the joy over their freedom would always be diminished by the suffering of the ancient Egyptians. To remember that with great freedom comes great responsibility. And as they watched the drops hit the plate, everyone sitting at table together pledged to work in their community for justice and for freedom. They pledged to never forget those who were the most vulnerable. Because they were once slaves in Egypt's land and the LORD God heard their cries and set them free.

And that night, the singing, the eating and the celebrating lasted for hours. And as I sat in the midst of it all, I felt surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. I felt re-immersed in an identity that I had almost forgotten. And in that time of remembering and reenacting, in that moment of worship, our identity was sealed and deepened, and the covenant to be God's people was renewed in each of our hearts.

In a few moments, we will gather around this table. All of us in this sanctuary—strangers and friends, young and old, men and women, different shades of skin and different accents. We will all participate as the bread is broken, the cup is poured, and all are invited. And as we pray the Great Prayer or hear the Words of Institution, we will be invited to remember another long-ago meal at Passover in an upper room. A long-ago meal hosted by our Savior that speaks to us of great freedom and great responsibility. A long-ago meal that continues to shape who we are and invite us into who we could be. A long-ago meal that reminds us of God's lavish grace, deep mercy, and vulnerable love.

And when the child asks "Mom, why does Pastor Julie break that bread?" you might respond, "Because God wants us to know that nothing separates us from God's love—not even our brokenness or Jesus' death." And if she asks "But why does Pastor Shannon pour the cup?" then you might say, "because that is what Jesus did with his friends to show them forgiveness and new life." And as they get older, the reasons you give also grow in depth and complexity.

But the beauty is that all along the way, as they watch and ask, as they eat and drink, they will hear again and again about how our God came to us in Jesus Christ to share our lives-- our joy and our pain, our tears and our laughter, our birth and even our death, so that we might share God's newness, Christ's community, and even his resurrection. And as we remember and reenact this meal, our identity as followers of Christ will be nourished and deepened, and the covenant to be God's people will be renewed in each of our hearts. And the story, God's story, will keep being told.

ⁱ A resource I used for this sermon is [Jewish Literacy](#) by Rabbi Joseph Telushkin. New York: William Morrow, 2001. It is a very reputable resource for Jewish history and thought. It helped me remember all of the "whats" and the "whys" that are involved in the Seder service.