



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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### This Day Shall be a Memorial Day

**Exodus 11:1-12:28**

Fr. William Klock

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We took a break from Exodus over Passiontide, Holy Week, and Easter, but this morning we're returning. If you remember, the last time we were in Exodus, we read about the first of the nine "great signs" that the Lord performed in Egypt. We finished with Chapter 10 and this morning we'll pick up our study with Chapter 11 and the tenth great sign.

The Lord had commanded Pharaoh, "Let my people go that they may worship me." When Pharaoh refused, the Lord followed it up with nine signs: blood, frogs, gnats, flies, dead livestock, boils, hail, locusts, and darkness. Each time Pharaoh refused. The tenth sign is introduced as we begin Chapter 11. Now, this section of Exodus is a relatively long one. It runs from Chapter 11 through to the middle of Chapter 13. It's not just about the tenth sign. It's also about the Passover and goes back and forth between the warning of the coming sign, instructions for the Passover, then liturgical instructions for later generations, then the sign itself and Israel's flight from Egypt, and then back to more instructions for future generations. Ideally, we'd look at it all at once to do it justice, but we don't have time for that this morning. (Avengers: Endgame is three hours and that's fine, but a sermon? For some reason that's different.) So this morning I'd like to look at Chapter 11 and the first half of Chapter 12. Next week we'll look at the rest. There will be a bit of overlap, but today I want to focus on the Passover as a participatory act of the people—and especially future generations—and think about what that means for us.

Next week I plan to look at the relationship between the death of the firstborn, the Passover lamb, and what that means for us.

So the first part of the passage: Look at 11:1-3.

**The LORD said to Moses, "Yet one plague more I will bring upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt. Afterward he will let you go from here. When he lets you go, he will drive you away completely. Speak now in the hearing of the people, that they ask, every man of his neighbor and every woman of her neighbor, for silver and gold jewelry." And the LORD gave the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians.**

So there will be one last sign, one last plague on the Egyptians. The Lord has hardened Pharaoh's heart so that these mighty acts will be seen by Israel, by Egypt, and by the watching world. Everyone will know the might and sovereignty of the God of Israel. But this final act will be the tipping point. Finally, Pharaoh will agree to let the Israelites go. In fact, he won't just let them go, he will drive them out. Even more, through this final act, the Lord will cause the Egyptians to load down the Israelites with their wealth as they depart. It's not clear exactly what's going on with this last part. Will the Egyptians be so afraid of the Israelites after this last act that they'll give them whatever they ask for? Will it be a sort of awe because of what their God has done for them? Is it a kind of reparations for their time as slaves? It's hard to say from the little the text tells us, but what's clear is that *this is the Lord's doing*. The Israelites don't just sneak away from Egypt in the night. They don't leave Egypt because of anything they've done. Pharaoh, who for so long as refused to let them go, will actually command them to depart and as they leave, they will despoil the Egyptians. There's a two-fold emphasis: First this reveals the power of the Lord and,

second, by it he not only frees, but he also blesses his people.

The nature of this final sign is revealed in verse 4 as we jump back to Moses' last audience with Pharaoh:

**So Moses said, "Thus says the LORD: 'About midnight I will go out in the midst of Egypt, and every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne, even to the firstborn of the slave girl who is behind the handmill, and all the firstborn of the cattle. There shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt, such as there has never been, nor ever will be again. But not a dog shall growl against any of the people of Israel, either man or beast, that you may know that the LORD makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel.' And all these your servants shall come down to me and bow down to me, saying, 'Get out, you and all the people who follow you.' And after that I will go out." And he went out from Pharaoh in hot anger. Then the LORD said to Moses, "Pharaoh will not listen to you, that my wonders may be multiplied in the land of Egypt." (Exodus 11:4-9)**

At midnight the Lord will pass through Egypt. In 12:23 Moses tells the Israelite elders about one he simply refers to as "the destroyer", who will do this. We often hear of an "angel of death", but the text just refers to the "destroyer" and here the Lord says that *he* will go out into Egypt to do this. The sense is that this destroyer is the Lord's representative, his agent—much like the "angel of the Lord" who met Moses in the burning bush. He or it acts on the Lord's behalf, at his command, and with his power and authority. And here he will take the life of every firstborn in the land of Egypt. There is no respecting of person, of class, of status, or even of people. Pharaoh's firstborn will die and so will the firstborn of the lowliest slave. As we'll see in a bit, even the Israelites are not exempt, although

Moses doesn't reveal that to Pharaoh. From the highest to the lowest, from the palace to the slave hut, even in the livestock pastures, the firstborn of all of Egypt will die.

But Israel will be spared—not because the Israelites will be exempt from this sentence of death, but because the Lord will give them a means of deliverance—but through this distinction between Egypt and Israel, everyone will know that this is the Lord and, most importantly, that he means business. The plagues have been revealing this all along. At first Pharaoh's magicians were able to copy what the Lord did, but pretty quickly they dropped out of the picture. They only returned after the ninth plague, when the sun was blotted out. Everyone, including the magicians and the priests and the nobles of Egypt, knew that this was the doing of the God of Israel. They all pleaded with Pharaoh to leave off and to give this God what he demanded. But still Pharaoh held out. Still Pharaoh refused to acknowledge the Lord. But in this final act, with the death of the firstborn of all of Egypt, there will be no doubt, even for Pharaoh.

This last act was directed right at him. In Egypt, Pharaoh had the power of life and death. Everyone, even his noblemen, belonged to him and were subject to his decrees. If Pharaoh said you were to die, you died. We saw this when the last Pharaoh issued his decree that the baby boys of the Israelites be cast into the Nile and murdered. And so the Lord is now showing that he is the one with the power of life and death—power Pharaoh can only pretend at. And, this last act too, is directed straight at Pharaoh's decree to murder the Israelite's children. This isn't the act of an angry, irrational, and sadistic god, lashing out at Egypt. This last act, this last plague is the Lord's deliberate vindication of his people. Israel, the Lord said back in Exodus 4,

was his firstborn son. Those baby boys cast into the Nile were the Lord's sons, murdered by Pharaoh. And now the Lord makes good on his promise to Pharaoh: You killed my firstborn sons and now I will kill yours. The Lord always does what he says he will do. Again, this last act was aimed straight at Pharaoh. When it was done, Pharaoh could no longer deny the power and authority of the God of Israel. He had no choice but to let the Lord's people go, commanding them with all his shaken authority to get out.

That's the Lord's warning to Pharaoh, but in preparation for this final act he also has important instructions for the Israelites. As he said to Pharaoh, while the Egyptians wail at the destroyer's passing, not so much as a dog would be disturbed amongst the Israelites this night. But that's not because the Israelites are different or exempt from the decree of death. Here's what the Lord instructs Moses on behalf of the Israelites:

**“This month shall be for you the beginning of months. It shall be the first month of the year for you. 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...Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male a year old. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats, 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. (Exodus 12:2-3, 5-6)**

Right up front, the Lord stresses how important this act is going to be for Israel. The Lord is about to reboot history, if you will. Think of the way in which the life of Jesus has split time in half for the Christian world, BC on one side and AD on the other. The Exodus and the Passover are going to do something like that for Israel. The Lord is birthing a nation, a people, his

firstborn in this mighty act and so, for them, the calendar resets with the Passover. This becomes their new year as a way to remember it in perpetuity.

And, notice, death touches Israel too, but not at the hands of the destroyer. Each household is to kill a lamb or a kid, a male, and one without blemish—the best of the flock. This sacrifice is meant to be costly and so the Lord gives these specific instructions lest the people offer him the lambs that were sick or of little value. Deliverance is costly. In verse 7 the instructions continue:

**“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...In this manner you shall eat it: with your belt fastened, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. And you shall eat it in haste. 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, both man and beast; 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. (Exodus 12:7-8, 11-13)**

So the lamb is not only slaughtered, but the blood is to be painted on the doorframe of the house as a sign to the destroyer to literally “pass over”. The blood is the sign that a death has already taken place in this house, a death in place of the firstborn son. And as if to drive home the point that this family has been spared by the death of the lamb, they're not only to display the blood on their door, but as a family they are to eat this sacrificial

lamb—all of it—and if the family is too small to eat it all, they are to join with a neighbouring family or families in this act.

And, tying this deliverance of the firstborn from death with Israel's deliverance from Egypt, they are to eat this meal in haste, ready to leave at any moment: shoes on their feet and walking stick in hand. At this point, the instructions seem to be for the benefit of future generations so that they would understand the significance of the night of deliverance and—most importantly—so that they could take part in it in a very tangible way, not just remembering, but living it. This becomes more apparent as we continue. In verses 14-20 the Lord gives instructions about the feast of unleavened bread—an older pre-existing springtime feast that is now given new meaning:

**“This day shall be for you a memorial day, and you shall keep it as a feast to the LORD; throughout your generations, as a statute forever, you shall keep it as a feast. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall remove leaven out of your houses, for if anyone eats what is leavened, from the first day until the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel... And you shall observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread, for on this very day I brought your hosts out of the land of Egypt. Therefore you shall observe this day, throughout your generations, as a statute forever. In the first month, from the fourteenth day of the month at evening, you shall eat unleavened bread until the twenty-first day of the month at evening. For seven days no leaven is to be found in your houses. If anyone eats what is leavened, that person will be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether he is a sojourner or a native of the land. (Exodus 12:14-15, 17-19)**

This is for the benefit of future generations. Along with the Passover, they are also to observe the feast of unleavened bread. As far as we know, this was a pre-existing feast, but the Lord gives it new meaning here as it becomes a reminder of the Exodus and the rush the Israelites were in to leave. Ordinarily, dough would be prepared the day before it was to be baked, in order for it to rise. As we'll find out, this is just what the Israelite women did, but they had to leave in such a hurry the next morning, that they never had a chance to bake their bread. They had to scoop it up and carry it with them. When they did eventually bake it, the leavening had stopped and the bread never rose. The feast became a reminder of this. But the leavening—or lack of it—became another significant reminder. In the Exodus, God created a new people for himself. And this mission of this new people was to witness and to represent the Lord to the nations. The Lord chose them and in doing so he made them holy. Holy, in Old Testament terms, is not a status you can earn or make for yourself. God is holy and what he declares to be holy becomes holy. What is holy belongs to him. What is holy represents him. And this is why purity was so important for Israel. This was the point of the law and of the sacrificial system. The law defined purity, it instructed the people in purity, and the sacrificial system gave a means of restoring purity when it was lost. The feast of unleavened bread became a symbol of this purity. By the blood of the Passover lambs, the Lord delivered his people from slavery into a new life. And in the feast of unleavened bread they were reminded of the kind of life they were brought into, a life of purity in which they displayed to the nations the character of the living God.

In verses 21-28 we read that Moses went to the elders of Israel with these instructions and that they “did just as the Lord had commanded Moses and

Aaron” (Exodus 12:28). But what I want to bring to your attention is what's written in verses 24-27:

**You shall observe this rite as a statute for you and for your sons forever. And when you come to the land that the LORD will give you, as he has promised, you shall keep this service. And when your children say to you, ‘What do you mean by this service?’ you shall say, ‘It is the sacrifice of the LORD's Passover, for he passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt, when he struck the Egyptians but spared our houses.’”**

The Lord was making a people for himself. He was taking them to the land he had claimed for himself, a place where they would live in his presence and represent him before the eyes of the world. At Mt. Sinai he would say to them, “Be holy, for I am holy” and he would give them the *torah* as a way of life for holy people. But they needed to know this. As we'll see, even the people who fled from Egypt in Exodus, who passed through the Red Sea, who saw Pharaoh's army drowned, who were led by the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire, and who ate manna in the wilderness, even they struggled to remember whose people they were. How much harder would it be for future generations, living in the goodness of the Lord's land, and with no experience of those miraculous events? Telling the stories of the Lord's mighty acts would certainly help. But human beings need more than that. As Christian philosopher James K. A. Smith often says, human beings are more than just brains on sticks. We're shaped by what we know in our heads, but we can be shaped even more profoundly by what we *do*. And so faith in the Lord has never been just about doctrines, it's about history, and it's not just about the knowledge of that history of his mighty deeds, but about his people's *experience* of them, their—our—

*participation* in them. Faith is shaped by our participation in ritual.

And so the future generations of Israelites weren't merely to recount the story of the Exodus to their children. As families, the Lord gave them specific instructions to re-enact his mighty deeds in a way that made those future generations participants in the Exodus. As Christians we talk about "sacraments"—baptism and the Lord's supper—as outward signs and seals of inward and spiritual graces. Things we can touch with our hands, smell with our noses, see with our eyes, and even taste with our mouths, things we *do* that allow us to be participants in God's mighty acts that happened long, long ago.

The Israelite children—the boys at least—bore in their flesh the physical sign of God's covenant: their circumcision. And every year those children participated with their family in the ritual of the Passover, not just recalling the events of the Exodus when God made those who were circumcised his people, but becoming participants in those events. The Exodus was theirs because of Passover.

Ritual. Repetition. Participation. They do something. They drive the reality of who we are into our being. They shape us. And they shape our faith. The Israelites were shaped as God's people as they participated in these Old Testament "sacraments", just as we are by the sacraments of the New Testament. Each of us, at one point, passed through the waters of baptism. It may not be as tangible as circumcision, but it unites us with Jesus nevertheless. Some of you passed through those waters as adults and can remember them very vividly. Others of us passed through them as infants. We can't remember—although my baptismal certificate hangs on my wall as a reminder. Some of you have candles, given to you at your baptism, to light each year

on the anniversary. The font, even if it wasn't the font where we were baptised, but the font placed prominently in the church serves as a reminder to us of our union with Jesus: that we are God's people.

But even more powerfully—just as with the Passover—the weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper allows us not only to recall, but to participate in the mighty acts of God—the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus and our deliverance from sin and death. We gather each week on Sunday—and by that very choice to worship not on Saturday as the Jews did, but on Sunday—we participate in his Resurrection. But when we follow Jesus' instructions, to re-enact this meal of bread and wine, we participate in those events. The Israelites ate the lamb that had died in place of their firstborn, and now the risen lamb comes to us and offers his body and his blood in the bread and the wine. At his Table we participate in his death and resurrection. As we gather we participate in being the people of God—not just coming as individuals, but coming together. Jesus died and rose again two thousand years ago, but here at his Table we become participants in those mighty acts of God. Here at his Table we are reminded in a tangible way—by sight, by smell, by hearing, by touch, by taste—that we are God's people. Here at his Table, the living word of God which we've have heard read and preached, now becomes flesh that we might meet him in the bread and wine.

As we acknowledged in the Collect, God gave his Son as a sacrifice for sins. As we come to his Table this morning to recall that sacrifice, let us also be encouraged to follow in his blessed steps as we walk in the new life he has given. As St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate

the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Corinthians 5:7-8).

Let us pray: Almighty God, who gave your only Son to be for us both a sacrifice for sin and an example of godly life: Give us grace that we may always receive with thankfulness the immeasurable benefit of his sacrifice, and daily endeavour to follow in the blessed steps of his most holy life, who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, on God, for evermore. *Amen.*