



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Firstborn

Exodus 12:29-13:16

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Last week we looked at the first half of this rather long passage of Exodus, 11:1-13:16. It weaves together the account of the Lord's tenth great sign—the death of the firstborn of Egypt—and the instructions for the Passover. Even the instructions for the Passover weave back and forth between the instructions given to the Israelite slaves who were about to be delivered to instructions for the future generations who would live in the freedom of the Lord's land and presence. History runs into liturgy and liturgy runs back into history. And as I said last week, there's a reason for that. The Passover was the Lord's means of drawing in future generations of his people so that they could go beyond merely recalling those historical events and actually participate in them in a sort of sacramental fashion. The Lord created a people for himself in the Exodus and the Passover reminded them in ways they could see, touch, taste, smell, and hear what the Lord had done for them and that the Lord had claimed them as his own. The Lord's Supper does the same thing for us and this is highlighted by the fact that when Jesus introduced it, he was celebrating the Passover with his disciples. He took the bread and he took the wine and he gave it new meaning as he himself became the lamb, God's Son, who died to make a people for himself.

And that leads us into the second half of this long passage. Last Sunday I stressed the participatory aspect of the Passover, these rituals that made even future generations participants in the Lord's deliverance and formation of a people. Today I want to focus our attention mainly on this idea of the

firstborn and of death as the cost of life. Look with me at Chapter 12. We'll pick up right where we left off last week, with verse 29. The Lord's decree has been communicated to Pharaoh and the Israelites have prepared. They've sacrificed their lambs. They've painted the blood on their doorposts.

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 Pharaoh rose up in the night, he and all his servants and all the Egyptians. And there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was not a house where someone was not dead. Then he summoned Moses and Aaron by night and said, "Up, go out from among my people, both you and the people of Israel; and go, serve the LORD, as you have said. Take your flocks and your herds, as you have said, and be gone, and bless me also!" (Exodus 12:29-32)

It's an awful scene. Lutheran commentator Terrence Fretheim describes it this way, "It happened in the middle of the night, when all of that world was dark. The darkness of the night matched the darkness of the deed. No household was spared, not one. Indeed, no barnyard escaped. It was a deed done while all were asleep; it was not a public execution, though the effects were public indeed. As hard as it is to say, the victims were primarily children: both boys and girls—whoever happened to be the firstborn in the family. It helps but little to say that there was no suffering; to use a modern image, it was sudden (infant) death syndrome throughout Egypt that night. One can appreciate the great cry that went up, from parents in particular, including Pharaoh himself. However much it is appropriate to speak of judgement, and Pharaoh's genocidal decision to kill all Hebrew baby boys was made not long ago, no reader can rejoice at the deaths

of children."¹ One does not get the sense that the Israelite rejoiced. As the Egyptians mourned, the Israelites stood in awe of their God. It was not an angry tantrum by an unstable deity as we read in so many myths. It was an act of deliberation and one aimed at a man who claimed divinity and ownership over God's own people. It was an act recalling that not long before, this supposed god-king had ordered the death of the Israelite's baby boys. It was a great sign aimed straight at a man who represented his people as he shook his fist at the Creator of heaven and earth, a man who took credit for the prosperity the Lord had bestowed on his people and nation, and a man who enslaved and murdered the people the Lord had claimed for himself.

This, the tenth of the Lord's might signs, finally undid Pharaoh. His priests and magicians, his nobles and advisors had been undone already by the previous plagues, but Pharaoh had continued to stand in defiance. But this last sign stripped him bare, personally, politically, and religiously. And he summoned Moses and Aaron and, just as the Lord had said he would, he ordered them to get up and go—actually demanding they worship the Lord. The Lord has bent Pharaoh's iron will to his own.

But it's not just Pharaoh. Again, just as the Lord had said, the Egyptian people pleaded with the Israelites to go and loaded them down with their gold and silver. Look at verses 33-36.

The Egyptians were urgent with the people to send them out of the land in haste. For they said, "We shall all be dead." So the people took their dough before it was leavened, their kneading bowls being bound up in their cloaks on their shoulders. The people of Israel had also done as Moses told them, for they had asked the Egyptians for silver and gold jewelry and for clothing. And the

¹ *Exodus* (Louisville: Westminster-John Knox, 2010), page 140.

LORD had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked. Thus they plundered the Egyptians.

What the Lord says he will do, he does. This is the righteousness of God that St. Paul so often appeals to in his epistles. God is faithful to his promises and faithful to his people.

Now the story shifts to some details, some of which are difficult.

And the people of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children. A mixed multitude also went up with them, and very much livestock, both flocks and herds. And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had brought out of Egypt, for it was not leavened, because they were thrust out of Egypt and could not wait, nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves.

The time that the people of Israel lived in Egypt was 430 years.
(Exodus 12:37-40)

The easy part: They left on foot: men, women, and children. They had their livestock with them. They even had their unbaked bread with them, which probably didn't seem very important at the time, but that bread in which the leavening had failed was to become an important symbol of the Exodus for later generations. We're also told that they left Egypt with a mixed multitude—with other people, presumably other slaves, who took this opportunity to escape from Egypt as well. They would eventually be circumcised and incorporated in the Lord's people. And we're reminded again that as much as they left in haste, they didn't skulk away in the night nor did they run away from Egypt in panic. That's not how the Lord works. No, the Lord had revealed himself to the Egyptians and in their awe, they opened Egypt's front door, so to speak, and ushered

the Israelites out while giving them their riches. Perhaps reparations for all those years of slavery.

Now, the other details aren't as easy. Twenty-five hundred or three thousand years ago saying that they travelled from Rameses to Succoth meant something, as did the other later geographical markers of their journey. Today we can only make educated guesses at the exact locations. We know they started in the Nile delta. We know they avoided the main road to Canaan that ran along the coast. And we know they travelled east through the land of marshes and lakes that lie between Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula. But beyond that, no one's sure. You can look at the maps in the back of your Bible to see some of the educated guesses that have been made.

The other difficult detail is this number: 600,000. If there were 600,000 men, the total population would have been between two and three million. And that tells us we can't take the number at face value. If there had been 600,000 Israelite men, they could have fought their way out of Egypt any time they wanted. If there had been 600,000 Israelite men, they never would have feared entering Canaan, where even the larger cities had populations of only around 10,000 people. 600,000 men wouldn't have been able to assemble in the court of the tabernacle as we're later told they did. And two or three million people—think the whole population of Greater Vancouver—could not have travelled as Exodus describes. Even at the time of the monarchy, archaeologists estimate that the whole population of Israel was about 300,000. So what's the deal with this enormous number and the corresponding numbers in Exodus and Numbers? It's hard to say. The two best options I've come across as I've studied are, first, that the Hebrew word for "thousand" was also used in these earlier times for family or military units. If we're talking about

600 family or fighting units, that would bring the population down to roughly 20,000 people, which is a very realistic number that fits with most—but not all—of what we read in Exodus and Numbers. The other solution, floated by one of my Hebrew professors, Ron Allen, after many years of trying to sort this out, is that the Old Testament writers routinely inflated their numbers by a factor of ten, so 600,000 was really 60,000. It seems dishonest to us and at odds with our ideas of the truthfulness of the Bible, but it's important to remember that people in the Ancient Near East had a very different idea of what it meant to report on historical events than we do. We want just the facts with no bias (and we almost always have bias despite that). That's not how ancient people did things. Inflation of numbers like these was the normal practice in the Ancient Near East and, Dr. Allen, argues, it makes perfect sense that the ancient Israelites would do the same thing. It doesn't make the Bible wrong or untruthful; it's just a matter of understanding the cultural context in which it was written. All that said, none of these solutions—and there are a few others—solve all the problems. At the end of the day we have to admit that some things may have been lost to history, we have to be humble about our ignorance, and we have to be patient. Someday the Lord will answer our questions.

Verse 42 highlights the most important part of all this:

It was a night of watching by the LORD, to bring them out of the land of Egypt; so this same night is a night of watching kept to the LORD by all the people of Israel throughout their generations.

Again, history leads us into liturgy and that liturgy leads future generations back into history and makes it theirs. The deliverance of Israel from Egypt was the Lord's doing and when future

generations of Israelites celebrated the Passover and asked what this night of watching is all about, through their participation they would be reminded of that night long ago when the Lord watched out for his people. I'd love to talk more about that and how we do the same when we celebrate the Lord's Supper, but that was last week's sermon and we don't have time to cover it again today.

The rest of Chapter 12 involves more liturgy—more instructions for the Passover in the future. It was for Israel and Israel alone. No foreigner was to partake of it unless he was first circumcised and incorporated into the people of God. And, again, we're told that the Israelites did just as the Lord had commanded. But then as we move into Chapter 13 the focus shifts back to this concept of the firstborn and the importance of the firstborn. Look at 13:1-2.

The LORD said to Moses, "Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine."

This may seem out of place, especially since the next paragraph goes on to explain the feast of unleavened bread that went along with Passover, but it's here because it explains the significance of the lamb and of the death of the firstborn children of Egypt. The Passover was, for Israel, a reminder that their life came from death. The lambs sacrificed every year at Passover were a reminder that it was only by that shed blood that the destroyer passed over their houses in Egypt, sparing their children. But the feast of unleavened bread, which particularly reminded them of their flight from Egypt, was also a reminder that God purchased their lives with the lives of the firstborn of Egypt. As I said before, this tenth sign or plague wasn't an angry God lashing out in his rage. The tenth plague was in response to Pharaoh's decree to kill

the Israelites' children, but it was also the Lord exercising his right over the firstborn. The Passover isn't just about the lamb dying in place of the firstborn of Israel. It's also about the Lord purchasing Israel—whom he called his firstborn son—through the death of the firstborn of Egypt. It was this final plague, this final catastrophe, that caused Pharaoh to release the Lord's people.

Pharaoh had tried to claim ownership over the firstborn of Israel, but in this last act, the Lord show that he really does have a claim on the firstborn—and not just of Egypt, but Israel as well. The destroyer did not distinguish between Egyptian and Israelite. The destroyer distinguished between the home marked with the blood of the lamb and the unmarked home. The firstborn belongs to the Lord. That's what's going on in verses 1 and 2. Verses 11-13 pick it up as well. Look at them:

"When the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites, as he swore to you and your fathers, and shall give it to you, you shall set apart to the LORD all that first opens the womb. All the firstborn of your animals that are males shall be the LORD's. Every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. Every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem.

Passover becomes a reminder of the Lord's ownership of the firstborn and the firstborn are a reminder of the Lord's ownership of Israel—again, the people he calls his firstborn son. The blood of the Passover lambs painted on the doorposts is a reminder of god's ownership of the firstborn son and *also* a reminder that the Lord provides for and protects his firstborn son. The redemption of the donkey with the lamb becomes yet another symbol reminding the people that they belong to the Lord and that the Lord

has redeemed them to live in his presence and will continue to provide for them.

If this idea of the firstborn bought from death by the blood of another sounds familiar, it should. This isn't the first time we've read about this idea in the Bible. Think of Abraham and the Lord's command to sacrifice Isaac. God could issue this command to Abraham because Isaac, as Abraham's firstborn son by Sarah, belonged to the Lord. He had every right to claim Isaac for himself and Abraham knew that. But what happened? The Lord redeemed Isaac from death by providing a ram to be sacrificed in his place.

The firstborn belonged to God. The firstborn were his by right. In Exodus 22:29 he commands, "The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me." And it's not just the humans. He also commands, "You shall do the same with your oxen and with your sheep: seven days it shall be with its mother; on the eighth day you shall give it to me." It even goes beyond humans and livestock. The firstfruits of all the produce of the promised land belonged to the Lord, which is why the people celebrated the feast of firstfruits. Everything firstborn belonged to him.

As we begin to understand this—and I think it's a part of the Old Testament we tend to overlook—but as we come to understand it, we get a sense of just why what Pharaoh did was so wrong. It wasn't just a sin against the Israelites. By killing the sons of the Israelites, he was killing those who were special to the Lord. By enslaving the Israelite people, he was claiming ownership over the Lord's firstborn son. Pharaoh was grasping at divinity and trying to usurp the Lord's place.

And so the Lord delivers his firstborn son, not by simply taking him out of Egypt. He follows the pattern already

established as we see going back to Abraham. The Lord delivers his people from death through the death of another. The Passover lamb becomes a symbol of that life bought by blood. Life is not cheap; life is very costly.

We see this theme carried on later in Numbers. The firstborn of Israel belong to God and are to be devoted to him, but God then chooses the tribe of Levi to take their place. Rather than dying themselves, they forfeit a share in the promised land and become the ones who serve the Lord in his tabernacle and who offer him sacrifices for the people of Israel.

Passover drew all these things together as it became a means not just of reminding the Israelites of their deliverance from Egypt, but a way for them to actually participate in and to own those events. This is why Jesus used the Passover as the foundation for the Lord's Supper. It is a reminder forever of our deliverance from our bondage to sin and death. It was his last act before he gave his life for ours. He is the lamb of the new Passover and the bread and wine represent his body and blood. As we come to his Table, we not only recall his death for us, but we participate in it.

But the Lord's Supper also reminds of the importance of the firstborn son and his consecration to the Lord. Israel was God's firstborn son. Jesus is the Son of God. Because of the trinitarian controversies that took place in the Third and Fourth Centuries and all the emphasis that has been placed on Jesus' title "Son of God" as representing his divinity, we've often forgotten that this was language drawn from the Old Testament and that first pointed to Jesus as Israel's representative. Jesus was the beloved Son of the Father, representing his people. In Jesus, God claims fully his right to the firstborn son and in sacrificing Jesus, the firstborn of all creation (as St. John puts it), God's redemption of Israel is finally

complete. Three days after his death, Jesus rose from the grave. Jesus was exalted and with him his people.

But it's not just Israel the firstborn that was delivered by Jesus' death and resurrection. It was also, as Old Testament scholar Jon Levenson puts it, Israel the "lateborn" that was redeemed as well. In light of the cross and the empty tomb of Jesus, we realise who God's people really are. As it turns out, they are not really the firstborn, but they *become* the firstborn through their—through *our*—union with Jesus, the true firstborn Son of God.

And then we see that we stand in line with a whole host of lateborn sons. We stand in line with Abel, with Isaac, with Jacob, with Joseph, with David—lateborn sons with no status, chosen by God to be his firstborn. They all point to us and to the way in which God graciously raises us, the lateborn, the Gentiles, the outsiders, to the status of firstborn sons (and daughters) of God—making those of us who once bore the name "Not my people" to be his beloved children. Jesus is the firstborn among many brothers. Through the death of Jesus, the Passover lamb, the Passover blessing of Israel has been extended to us.

Think on that today as you come to the Lord's Table. Think on the costliness of Jesus sacrifice. To purchase our redemption cost him his blood. That says something about our unworthiness, but it also communicates something amazing about the love of God for sinners. But, Brothers and Sisters, it also says something profound about grace. We were not only rebels, idolaters, and sinners, but we were also the outsiders and the lateborn with no claim on God's mercy. Despite all of that, he gave his firstborn Son for our sake that we might, through him, be his people—his sons and daughters.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, we were not only sinners in open rebellion against you, we were also outsiders. We were, as Hosea put it, "Not your people". But in your love for us, you gave your Son, the firstborn of all creation, to die that we might, through faith and our union with him, truly be your sons and daughters. Keep us mindful of your grace, we pray, that we might never take it for granted, but always remember the great cost of our redemption and love you in return in our worship and obedience. We ask this through Jesus, our firstborn brother and redeeming lamb. Amen.