

An Act of Mercy

Exodus 12:1-14

Last week we engaged the story of God calling to Moses out of a burning bush. Moses and his brother Aaron were sent to Egypt to confront Pharaoh demanding that the Hebrew people be freed from Egyptian enslavement. After Moses and Aaron got to Egypt, Pharaoh's hard-heartedness forced God to bring a series of plagues upon Egypt. Pharaoh was intransigent following each plague.

Our story this morning tells of God's instructions as to how the Israelites were to prepare for the tenth and final plague. This passage recounts one of the most defining moments in Jewish history. From this point forward everything changes. For all succeeding Jewish generations, Passover becomes the paradigm-changing watchword. To this very day, all Jewish history, culture, and religious life are centered in and around Passover, that seminal moment when God freed them from enslavement. Passover for the Jew is an act of remembrance of God's mercy with them.

How Passover was achieved is important. The Lord instructed Moses and Aaron to tell the people to prepare a *lamb* and eat it in preparation for their escape from Egypt. They were told to place some of the blood of the *lamb* on the door frame of each Jewish house so the angel of death would "pass over" when it came to slay the firstborn of all Egypt, human and animal. The *lamb* is a defenseless animal. When we move forward about fifteen hundred years to the first chapter of the Gospel of John, we find John the Baptist standing in the Jordan River calling repenters to come and be baptized. Upon seeing Jesus walking toward him, John says, "Behold the *lamb* of God, who takes away the sins of the world."

A skeptic might look at God's instructions and dismiss them. Why would an omnipotent God need to use a sign to help distinguish between the Israelites and the Egyptians? If God could tell, in a given household, between the firstborn and the others, why is it he could not tell between the chosen people and their oppressors?

The answer to the skeptic is that God didn't need a physical sign – but the people did. Scripture repeatedly gives us this pattern, where God's people are invited to participate in some way or the other in God's saving acts. God does not need that assistance but it is by his grace and for our faith that he requires it.

Why is the Jewish Passover important for us Christians? As we know, the last week of Jesus' life is called his Passion. On Thursday of that week in Jerusalem, Jesus, a Jew, observed Passover with his disciples. The Seder, or Passover, meal is thoroughly ritualized. The food is precisely prescribed, including a lamb bone. The order of eating is also prescribed. The words that are spoken, and when they are spoken, are also carefully mandated. The Seder meal never varies in any of its elements. The Passover meal points back to our story from Exodus 12.

We also know that during this meal, Jesus interrupted it twice, first to break the bread and later to lift the cup. He told his friends that whenever they repeated this new ritual they were to do it in remembrance of the breaking of his body and the shedding of his blood for the forgiveness of their sins. We call it Holy Communion. Like Passover for the Jew, Communion for us is an act of remembering God's mercy.

Within the lexicon of the Church, the words "grace" and "forgiveness" are used frequently. A word we don't hear very often is "mercy." Thomas Merton, a French-born American Trappist monk, wrote about his religious community. He said that when a prospective convert was first brought before the brothers, he was made to stand in the middle of them as they formed a circle. The abbot would then ask him, "What do you come seeking?" The answers varied. Some would say, "I come seeking a relationship with God." Others were more pragmatic: "I desire to become more disciplined in my practices of life." And there were a few who were simply running away: "I hope to find solace from the world and refuge from the problems that have plagued me."

Thomas Merton said that there was really only one answer, which every novice needed to articulate with a genuine heart before they could take up residence with the brothers: “I need mercy!” Merton explained that any other answer betrayed our prideful assertion of self-determination. *We* wanted, *we* planned, *we* were running away from, *we* desire. But the person who truly knew their need for mercy had stepped out of the myopic circle of self-interest long enough to begin to see the fragile interdependence of all who were taken into the larger fellowship of faith.

Israel was created out of an act of mercy by God that involved the slaughter of thousands of lambs. She would forever remember it in the Passover. Christianity was created out of an act of mercy by God that involved the slaughter of one single Lamb, that we might be freed of our sins.

I believe we need to think more often about God’s mercy than we do. We ask for his forgiveness, and through heartfelt confession and repentance we receive it. And we are grateful. But rarely do we acknowledge that God’s forgiveness and grace come to us because he is merciful. We don’t deserve what he gives, but by his mercy we are given it anyway.

Presbyterian pastor, Bruce Larson, tells the story of a Catholic priest friend of his, a much beloved man of God who once carried a secret burden of long-past sin buried deep in his heart. He had committed the sin once, many years before, during his time in seminary. No one else knew of this sin. He had repented of it and he had suffered years of remorse for it but he still had no peace, no inner joy, no sense of God’s forgiveness.

There was a woman in the priest’s parish who deeply loved God, and who claimed to have visions in which she spoke with Christ, and he with her. The priest, however, was skeptical of her claims, and so to test her visions he said to her, “You say you actually speak directly with Christ in your visions. Let me ask you a favor. The next time you have one of these visions, I want you to ask him what sin your priest committed while he was in seminary.”

The woman agreed and went home. When she returned to the church a few days later, the priest asked her, “Well, did Christ visit you in your dreams?”

She replied, “Yes, he did.”

“And did you ask him what sin I committed in seminary?”

“Yes, I asked him.”

“Well, what did he say?”

“He said, ‘I don’t remember.’”

This is another act of mercy that is gifted to us by God. When our sins are forgiven, they are forgotten. The past – with its sins, hurts, brokenness, and self-recrimination – is gone, dead, crucified, and remembered no more. What God forgives, God forgets.

The day before his Crucifixion, Jesus gave us Holy Communion. It is our remembrance of God’s acts of mercy. We come now to that holy time. As you come forward this morning, may you do so with the thought, “I need mercy!” And may you also know that mercy is given to you by our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Lamb of Mercy. Thanks be to God! Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 4 September 2011