

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor
First Christian Church
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Moses & His People & Their God III. Passover and Promise

(Exodus 12:1-14 NRSV) 1 The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: 2 This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. 3 Tell 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. 4 If 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. 5 Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. 6 You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. 7 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. 8 They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. 9 Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. 10 You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. 11 This 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. 12 For 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. 13 The 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. 14 This 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.

The Greenville, South Carolina, television station reported that she was well-liked. One neighbor said that she was very well-liked, and was quoted as saying “I’m completely shocked....” The woman in question is named Barbara Glenn, who was arrested not long ago in South Carolina thirty-five years after escaping from prison in Michigan where she had been convicted of assault and writing bad checks. But that was a life that none of her South Carolina neighbors knew; they knew her as a pleasant person who fit well into her affluent community – a good neighbor and the last person you would imagine to be an escaped felon.¹ It’s the sort of story that does seem to

¹<http://www.wyff4.com/news/17268761/detail.html#->

come along from time to time, isn't it? Stories about a single person who seems to live two very different lives. In fact, the way these stories are reported is predictable: the neighbors express shock at the other life that someone had led, and one of them talk about how nice, how pleasant, how decent he or she seemed. Or, to take another example, one doesn't have to search far through even the icons of American history to find this same phenomenon: one person, two seemingly very different lives. Thomas Jefferson, the man who would pen the words about all being equal not only owned slaves but fathered children with one, and then used his own children as slaves. One person, two seemingly very different lives. Lyndon Johnson could courageously defy his upbringing and his friends to lead Congress to pass a voting rights act that would make it possible for an African-American to become President. But Johnson could also be vicious and mean to those who worked for him, taking delight in humiliating them and cheating on his loving and long-suffering wife. One person, two seemingly very different lives.

And yet, when we read such revelations, when we see someone whom we thought we knew have an entirely different side, an entirely different life, as it were, we may be surprised, we may be saddened, we may even be aghast – but the *idea itself* of such duality doesn't shock us. For we know that these are simply extreme cases of what is within us all: One person, two seemingly very different lives. There are things in every one of our lives that would surprise others to find out; every one of us has two lives – and sometimes more! – that others might be surprised to find out. Sometimes the less public of those lives – the ones that people would be surprised to discover – are benign and even fun: the 70+ year old grandmother who has long had a passion for hang-gliding, who secretly subscribed to hang-gliding magazines, and who on her 80th birthday took her first hang-glide. *“But grandma was always such a down-to-earth person; I don't know what got into her; I never knew this side of her life!”* Others of

those less public lives are less benign, and may even be shameful, and, I suspect every one of us has parts of our lives that we hope indeed will never be seen by anyone else.

Now, we *might* think that because we are so familiar with this phenomenon of virtually everyone having some sort of dual life that that **ought** to help us understand our scripture reading for this morning. It is a deeply troubling one, isn't it? In fact, Rev. Sarah Buteaux has a comment that may fit what some of you are wondering in the face of this scripture about that awful night so long ago in ancient Egypt. She says this:

...You may be secretly thinking to yourself that you are not sure which is worse, having to listen to this kind of twisted, abusive, misguided, patriarchal, rhetoric, or watching a well intentioned liberal protestant minister do her very best to ... contort this ancient story.... Bleck.²

So what **do** we do with this story? We cannot simply dismiss it or avoid it or gloss on over it for two reasons: first, the story of the Passover – and God's intention that God's people be liberated from anything that would hurt and enslave their lives – is the basis on which all of Judaism was built. Which, of course, is to say that it is also foundational to the Christian faith, for, after all, the last supper that Jesus celebrated with his disciples, what we also re-enact every Sunday at communion, was in fact the Passover Meal that was instituted by this passage in Exodus. But second – and this is really the topic for this morning -- this story goes to the heart of how it is that we read and interpret the Bible – and how we can make a terrible mistake if we *wrongly* interpret it.

Let's start, then, with the first reason that this story is crucial. To do so, we need a bit of recap. Last week we left Moses there at the burning bush with God telling him that his purpose in life was not simply to be a contented shepherd in a land far from his people, but to lead his people out of the awful slavery in which they were enmeshed.

²http://web.mac.com/revsarahb/Firstchurchhadley/Seventh_Sunday_After_Pentecost,_Year_A.html

And to make a long story short, after Moses spends much time arguing and contending with God, he does indeed return to Egypt and begins seeking to convince Pharaoh to let his people go. After much struggle, Pharaoh indeed finally decides to let the Hebrew people leave. And in today's scripture, God tells the people that to honor and memorialize this liberation that they are about to receive, they are to prepare a special meal in a special way. Moreover, they are also to be dressed in a certain way for this meal – they are to be in their traveling clothes, ready to go on a moment's notice.

The symbolism is rich here. And it is no accident that in virtually every culture there are ritual meals associated with life's most poignant and holy moments. For eating is ubiquitous; without eating we die. When we eat, we live. And the point of linking eating and God is to say that when we eat we proclaim that it is **God** who provides our sustenance body, mind, and soul. And so this powerful Passover meal, first celebrated there in Egypt, became the basis for the Jewish people's understanding of their life under God – that God is the one who always, always **feeds and frees**. *Feeds and frees*.

But now to the second point: Too many commentators pass too quickly by the awful part of this story or gloss it over. You heard it: part of what will happen while the Hebrew people eat that meal is that every firstborn – from humans to cattle to cats – will die that night. And, in fact, the reason that the meal comes to be called “the Passover” meal is because it is asserted that God “passed over” the houses where the Hebrew people had marked their doorposts in a certain way. And the inescapable conclusion, if you **simply** read this text at face value, is that God's liberating and freeing *some* people comes at the price of God hurting and killing *other* people.

But, my friends, this is where we need to remind ourselves of what we know about how we should read our Bibles. This is why it is a mistake to think that you can simply pick up your Bible, turn to any verse in it, and treat what falls under your finger as

always equal in weight or meaning or truth to any other verse. I opened this sermon with stories about people – and that likely includes all of us – who have in some way dual lives. And as we read our Bibles from beginning to end, it might also **apparently** look like God too has a dual life. For there are indeed two kinds of streams of thought that run throughout the Bible: on the one hand, there is the God who is understood like a warrior, a mighty tyrant, one who uses violence to get his way and do his will. But there is another strain, a gentler stream, that runs throughout the Bible too: that is the stream that shows that when God creates it is not by violence, but by the persuasive power of a **word**; that is the stream that shows that no matter how badly we screw up, God abides and cares and wants to forgive and will forgive. A God of indeed amazing grace.

But, here's the thing: Saying that even God has such a dual life will finally not do. Why? Well, psychologists tell us that one of the chief hallmarks of an abusive parent is a complete and utter inconsistency about how they treat their children. The child of such a one never knows whether this is a day when the parent will be loving and caring, or hurtful and mean. And what happens is that the child learns that's in his or her self-interest not so much to *love* the parent – although they do – but to learn how to *placate* the parent in the hopes of there being more good days than horrid days. *But – Is that our God?* Well, it would appear so, wouldn't it, if all we can say is "Well, everyone has something of a dual life and God does too – sometimes God is violent and even scary; other times God is gentle and nurturing and forgiving and compassionate."

But I don't think we want to say that, do we? We want a God we can worship rather than an inconsistent tyrant that we placate. But how do we *have* such a God when scripture **seems** to depict God as indeed having such a dual personality? By remembering something that is utterly key thing about how to read and interpret and understand our Bibles and that is this: **the Bible is not just a recording, as if it were some kind of super Tivo, of what God is like and what God did.** No, the Bible is the

human attempt over three thousand years to understand what God is like based on God's dealings with them. *Do you hear the difference?* It's the difference between saying something in your own words, and hearing what you said repeated in a way that you may not even recognize! There was a philosophy professor at the University of Chicago in the early twentieth century³ who never published anything himself about his teachings and beliefs; rather, after his death, his students published books under his name that were their collection of the lecture notes *they* had kept. Now, some of you in this room are teachers. Would you want an evaluation and assessment of what you taught based **only, only**, on what your students thought you had said? Don't you think that there would be opportunity for them to utterly miss the point? No doubt!

And sometimes, my friends, in the long history of the Jewish and Christian people, when a writer wrote something about God that eventually made its way into scripture, *that something tells you far more about the person writing than it does about God*. Do you really want to think, based on the God that has been shown to you in the gentle face of Jesus Christ, that the God of whom it is said in Psalm 147 is that He delights when the Hebrew people dash their enemies' babies to death on the rocks is saying something about **God**? Or is it saying more about the situation and the fury of the writer? The entire mid-portion of the Book of Isaiah, likely written as the Hebrew people were preparing to leave their exile in Babylon centuries after our story for today, can be read as a conversation between the Hebrew people and God and in the course of that conversation the Hebrew people make repeated mistakes about who God is and what God is like.⁴ Jesus famously rebuked even Peter for misunderstanding him, and the Gospel of Mark, in particular, is full of stories of the disciples believing mistaken

³George Herbert Mead

⁴Charles Blaisdell, "'Speak to the Heart of Jerusalem': The 'Conversational' Structure of Deutero-Isaiah," Encounter 52:1, Winter 1991.

things about God and Jesus. So here's the point: You cannot simply pick out a verse here and there and say "this is what God definitely and truly is like" because sometimes those verses are in fact the record of a *mistaken or incomplete* understanding of God, an understanding that God continues to try to correct and improve, for framing our understanding of God well can indeed bring us life abundant, and framing that understanding incorrectly can make life a living, despairing hell.

As I was preparing this sermon, Barbara commended to me a short film from the 2008 Cannes Film Festival entitled "The Story of the Sign."⁵ I'm very glad she did. In fact, I urge every one of you to rent or view online. It is the simple story, set in Mexico City, of a beggar lying on the street with a tin can in front of him and a handwritten sign that says "*Ten compasion; estoy siego.*" "*Have pity on me; I am blind.*" Numerous people walk by, utterly ignoring him. Then a well-dressed man stops, thinks for a second, takes the beggar's sign, turns it over and writes a different message on it. The rest of the film shows dozens of people stopping and putting coins and bills into the beggar's can. At the end of the day, the well-dressed man returns and the beggar asks him "*What did you do to my sign?*" The man responds that he changed it to: "*Hoy es un dia hermosa, pero no puedo verlo.*" "*Today is a beautiful day, but I can't see it.*" What an amazing difference: re-framed the man's situation, he changed the context from one which simply evoked pity and guilt to one that appeal to the beauty of God's world and our shared humanity and to the fact that God indeed is a God who wants always and only grace and justice for **everyone**.

One of Martin Luther King's favorite quotes was this: "*The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.*"⁶ In the very same way, I think we can also

⁵<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4-K8bpoDn-8>

⁶<http://www.commondreams.org/archive/2007/05/11/1118/>

say that the arc of the Biblical story of our family of faith is also long, but it has bent, and continues to bend towards understanding that God is **not** a dual personality, **not** inconsistent, **not** abusive, **not** the sort of God who would help to free some folks while hurting and killing others. And, as with that beggar and his sign, it is also crucial for **us** to frame **our** understanding of God in a way that celebrates the fact that God is the God of all, that God cares for everyone and everything God has made. This is the God which the book of Second Peter so beautifully says this: “...*God is patient and does not want or will that anyone – anyone! – should perish.*”^{7 8}

For that very good news of a God of gentleness and justice for **all**, let us say “Amen”!

⁷Paraphrased from 1 Peter 3:9

⁸I am indebted to Professors Clark Williamson and Ron Allen of Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis, Indiana, for their wisdom expressed in an exchange of private emails on this sermon’s topic. I am also very indebted to the Rev. Barbara Blaisdell for her always perceptive thoughts. I am blessed by such wise counsel.