

The Feast of the Passover

preached by Rev. Paul Sakasov on April 15, 2018

This morning we are beginning a seven part sermon series that will take us back in time and allow us to explore a forgotten culture that lies at the heart of ancient Israel. This morning we will begin looking at the seven feasts described in the Old Testament, which God instituted to guide the life of His people over the course of a calendar year. The seven feasts are as follows: Passover, Unleavened Bread, Firstfruits, Pentecost, Trumpets, Day of Atonement, and Tabernacles.

The reason these feasts are important for us to consider is three fold. First, understanding them will greatly enhance our comprehension of the Bible, as one cannot understand the stories it tells without knowing the underlying culture. Thus, the more we know about the seven feasts, the more we will get out of the Bible as most of the stories it tells centers around Jewish life.

Secondly, the purpose of Scripture is to point us towards Jesus, to reveal who he is, and how God is making all things new through him. As we noted in our previous sermon series on the five types of sacrifices found in the Old Testament, they all find their fulfillment in Jesus. And through our examination of these five sacrifices we gained a better understanding of who Christ is, what he has done for us, and how he has made a pathway for us to dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

In a similar way, the seven feasts of the Old Testament also find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. They also help us understand Christ's redemptive work in the world and how we are called to partner with Christ in doing God's will.

The third reason it is important for us to study the seven feasts as recorded in the Old Testament is that they give us a glimpse into things to come. The way they point us towards things to come is through their ordering. If we look at the first four feasts, they take place during the spring; during planting season. The last three feasts take place in the fall, during harvest season. In the gospels, Jesus makes many references in his parables to the harvest as being the time of his long awaited return. As a result, it is reasonable to conclude that the first four feasts speak mostly about the first coming of Christ, and the last three feasts speak mostly about the second coming of Christ.

These are the reasons it is important for us to study the Old Testament feasts. And this is what we will strive to achieve over the course of this sermon series.

With this in mind, let us turn to today's Scripture reading, which describes the first feast of seven, the Passover. Our text for this morning, is Exodus chapter twelve, verses one through thirteen.

Exodus 12:1-13

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.

A couple of weeks ago, many of us participated in the Seder supper on Maundy Thursday. For most of us, myself included, it was the first time we had experienced a traditional Passover meal, like the one Jesus observed with his disciples on the night in which he was betrayed.

As our Scripture reading for today tells us, this meal was first instituted by God as the Israelites came out of Egypt. In its original form, the meal was very simple. However, over time, Jewish people have added many traditions to the original celebration. The supper we celebrated and that Jesus celebrated included many of the traditions that have been added over time. Ours also included an explanation of how Jesus fulfilled the Passover.

Recalling the details, the Passover dinner is built around four cups of wine. The first cup is the Cup of Sanctification. The service begins by the drinking of this cup. At this time the father tells the Passover story using items from a special plate, called the Seder Plate, to tell the story we just read, only in much greater detail. He then breaks and hides the middle piece of unleavened bread taken from a special pouch that contains three pieces of unleavened bread.

This is followed by the drinking of the second cup of wine, called the Cup of Judgment. This cup focuses on how God judged the gods of Egypt through the ten plagues, the last of which was described in our reading today from Exodus twelve. At this time the family tastes the bitter herbs and the charoset. Then, the meal is served.

As the meal continues, the Cup of Redemption is consumed and the father finishes the Passover story. Finally the evening concludes by drinking the Cup of Praise, which focuses on praising God for calling a people unto Himself.

This is a very basic summary of how Passover is celebrated among Jews, even to this day, and how it would have been celebrated in the times of Jesus. While many additions have been made from the original meal prescribed for the first Passover, the basic elements including the bitter herbs, the unleavened bread, and the Passover lamb still remain. As any Jewish child would know, the bitter herbs represent the suffering of God's people, the unleavened bread represents the removal of sin, the body of the Passover lamb strengthened God's people as they left the land of slavery, and the blood of the lamb saved them from the angel of death.

Here are some more details about the Passover that are also worthy of our attention. Starting with the blood that was applied on the door of each home, as described in verse seven of today's reading, when applied in the manner prescribed by God, the blood made the letter "Chet" which is the seventh letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which carries the meaning "life." According to our reading today, this means that whenever the angel of death came to a home that had the letter of life on it, the angel of death would "Passover" the house. This is how the Passover feast gets its name.

In the days of the Exodus, the lamb whose blood was shed was taken from the flocks of the Jewish people who were in Egypt. However, in the days of Jesus, there were special fields in Bethlehem, which was five miles south of Jerusalem, that were dedicated for raising Passover lambs.

In Jesus' time, it was the duty of the High Priest of Israel to select and declare the Passover lamb for sacrifice. In fulfilling this mandate, he would go down to Bethlehem and select a pure, spotless lamb. This is interesting to observe, because we know that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the place of the Passover lambs. Furthermore, in John 11:50, Caiaphas, the High Priest, when plotting to kill Jesus declared, "You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish." By saying this, Caiaphas selected the lamb born in the fields from Bethlehem to be sacrificed for the people.

While Caiaphas made this declaration behind closed doors, John the Baptist, openly testified to the people of Israel that Jesus was the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The interesting thing about John the Baptist is that he was a descendant of Aaron, the brother of Moses, the first High Priest of Israel. John was also born during Passover.

As we learned at our Seder supper, Jewish Passover tradition includes an empty seat at the head table which is set apart for Elijah. During the dinner, a child is sent to open the front door of the house in the hopes that Elijah will come and announce the coming of the Messiah. As Jesus told his disciples, John came in the spirit of Elijah. And John said of Jesus, he is the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. So either way, through John or Caiaphas, Jesus was declared to be the Passover lamb.

Here is some more background. When the High Priest would go from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to find the perfect lamb, after he found it, he would carry it back to Jerusalem on his shoulders to avoid the possibility of the lamb getting injured. This would happen four days before the Passover, which in Jesus' day would have been on Palm Sunday. On that date, the High Priest would have entered Jerusalem through the Golden Gate carrying the Passover lamb on his shoulders while being greeted by people who lined the path rejoicing because the sacrificial lamb had been chosen. This was the same day Jesus entered Jerusalem through the Golden Gate, riding on a donkey, to the cheers of the crowd.

From there, the Passover lamb was brought to the entrance of the temple for everyone to inspect it and observe that the lamb was without blemish. In the same way Jesus was also brought to the temple and examined by the Pharisees, and the Sanhedrin, and then Pilate, Herod, and Pilate again who concludes, "I can find no fault with this man."

Then, Jesus was taken to the cross, and Scripture tells us that he died at 3 p.m., which is the time the Passover lambs were sacrificed. Also, the hill on which Jesus was crucified, which we know as Calvary, is part of Mount Moriah. That is the same place where God called Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, and where God provided a substitute.

When the Passover lamb was tied to the temple gate in order for it to be inspected, a sign was tied to its neck identifying it as the Passover Lamb. When Jesus hung on the cross, a sign was placed over him reading, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." In Hebrew, the first letter from each word in this title spells, "Yahweh," which is the sacred name of God given to the Jewish people in the Old Testament. This may be part of the reason the chief priests wanted to have the wording on the sign changed.

A final note. When Abraham offered up the ram for Isaac, its blood was sufficient to cover one man. When the blood of the lamb was spilled on the night of the Passover, its blood was powerful enough to cover an entire family. When the blood of the goats and lambs were spilled on the great day of Atonement, its blood was sufficient to cover the sins of an entire nation. But, when Jesus' blood was spilled on the cross, his blood was sufficient to take away the sin of the world.

This is the message of the Passover. Jesus offers us his body and blood, so that we may be free from the slavery of sin, and so that the angel of death may pass over us. In response to this great gift that God has given to us, may we respond, like the people of Israel on the first Passover. May we prepare ourselves to walk away from bondage, may we prepare ourselves to walk away from a life of sin, and may the doorposts of our heart be marked with the blood of the Lamb, and may the letter on our hearts be the letter, "Chet," which means life.