

The Feast of Unleavened Bread

preached by Rev. Paul Sakasov on April 22, 2018

This morning we are turning to the second sermon in 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 continue our exploration of 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. Since the service of worship was canceled at Knox Flos last week, and given that only a handful of people braved the miserable weather in Elmvale, I will repeat the introductory remarks from last week's sermon, as they set the tone for the series.

In the preamble to last Sunday's sermon, the central question addressed was, "why?" Why study the seven feasts? In response, three answers were given. 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 second feast of seven, the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Our text for this morning, is Exodus chapter twelve, verses fourteen through twenty.

Exodus 12:14-20

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. 15 Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread; on the first day you shall remove leaven from your houses, for whoever eats leavened bread from the first day until the seventh day shall be cut off from Israel. 16 On the first day you shall hold a solemn assembly, and on the seventh day a solemn assembly; no work shall be done on those days; only what everyone must eat, that alone may be prepared by you. 17 You shall observe the festival of unleavened bread, for on this very day I brought your companies out of the land of Egypt: you shall observe this day throughout your generations as a perpetual ordinance. 18 In the first month, from the evening of the fourteenth day until the evening of the twenty-first day, you shall eat unleavened bread. 19 For seven days no leaven shall be found in your houses; for whoever eats what is leavened shall be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether an alien or a native of the land. 20 You shall eat nothing leavened; in all your settlements you shall eat unleavened bread.

In last Sunday's sermon we examined the feast of the Passover, both in its original form, and the elaborate ritual that had developed over the centuries and was used during Jesus' day. This week we will be turning our attention to the Feast of Unleavened Bread, a celebration in the Jewish calendar that started at Passover and continued for seven days. Like the Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread evolved over time.

By the time of Jesus, the practiced tradition was that one month before Passover, the mother of the home would begin going through the entire house in order to remove every trace of leaven, or what we call yeast, from her home. This means she would throw out the yeast in her house and any food that had been made with yeast, and any trace of food that had been made of yeast. Not a crumb of bread could remain. It is from this thorough cleaning of the house in the spring season that we get the term, "spring cleaning."

After the mother of the home was satisfied that the house was clean, she would leave ten pieces of leaven throughout the house for the father to find in the ceremony that would take place at the beginning of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. This ceremony, as many of us experienced, was part of the Passover meal.

As we learned, the search for leaven was conducted with a candle for light, and with a feather for a broom, and with a wooden spoon for a dust pan. When the father found a piece of leaven, he would brush it into the spoon, and then place it in a bag. Once the ten pieces were found, the bag would be taken outside the house and it was burned. This ceremony was done to symbolically show that God's commandments had been kept and that all sin had been removed from their home.

From that moment the only bread that could be eaten for the next seven days was bread that was made without yeast. The reason for this observance goes back to the original Passover. In Exodus, chapter twelve, we learned that when God passed through the land of Egypt on the night

of the Passover, and the first born throughout the land was killed, Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron during the night and told them to take the Hebrew people and leave at once. This desperation was echoed by the people of Egypt who urged them to go immediately, lest all the Egyptians die.

In response to this request, the Hebrew people did not wait for morning. Having received their freedom, they knew better than to give Pharaoh an opportunity to change his mind. Thus, in the middle of the night, they gathered their things, including their kneading troughs that were filled with unleavened dough, and they left the land.

Now at first, this detail does not seem very significant, and yet this detail lies as the heart of the meaning of this sacred feast. And, the reason the unleavened bread is significant in the story of the exodus is because it represents the speed and the timing at which God's salvation comes. In other words, when God's salvation arrived, it was so sudden, and so unexpected that the Hebrew people did not even have time to put the leaven in their bread. When God's salvation came it was so sudden that all they had time to do was take their kneading troughs filled with unleavened dough, and go.

This is one of the key lessons of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. After four hundred and thirty years of living in a foreign land, having been slaves for most of those years, and having cried out to God for salvation, to the point of giving up hope, God's salvation suddenly appeared, at a time, in a place, and in a way that no one could have expected or imagined.

In a similar way, when Jesus first came to earth, the Jewish people had once again been enslaved, this time by Rome. When Christ arrived, the Jewish people were looking for a deliverer who would save them; they were looking for the long awaited Messiah.

And lo and behold, God sent an unexpected Saviour into the world. God sent His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to save His people and to save the world from slavery to sin. After countless centuries of oppression, God moved swiftly to bring deliverance in a sudden and dramatic fashion. God came like a thief in the night, in a time, and in a place, and in a way that no one could have anticipated or imagined, and saved His people.

And how did God save His people? This message is also given to us through the ritual of the Unleavened Bread. First, in the preparation of the unleavened bread, the bread is bruised and beaten into its shape, it contains stripes because of the way that it is grilled, and it is pierced numerous times to allow for proper cooking. (In many ways, the unleavened bread looks like a giant soda cracker.)

In Isaiah fifty three, the prophet writes of the servant of God who was bruised for our iniquities, and by whose stripes we are healed. In Zechariah twelve, the prophet foretells of a coming day of salvation for the people of Israel when they will look upon the one that they pierced. In the context of the passage, the one whom they will look upon is the Lord himself.

Furthermore, during the Passover meal, which marks the beginning of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, three pieces of bread are placed in a Unity bag which has three separate compartments to hold them in. The middle piece of bread is broken during the ceremony and then wrapped in a special cloth and hidden in the home, waiting to be discovered and revealed to the whole family later in the ceremony. This ritual, which existed in the time of Jesus, makes perfect sense in terms of Christian theology. The three pieces of bread in the Unity bag represents the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. The second piece of bread represents God the Son, whose body was broken, was wrapped in cloth and hidden for three days only to be revealed shortly thereafter to the delight of his disciples.

Finally, in the Bible, the word leaven is most commonly used as a symbol of sin. Thus, the bread in the Unity bag, and in particular the second piece of bread, which represents Jesus, tells us that Jesus, whose body was broken was without sin.

And the whole point of eating the unleavened bread is so that the people of God may be nourished with pure food, so that we may be pure people, who live pure lives. In today's Bible reading, this message is emphasized by the harsh judgement that was to be administered to anyone who ate leavened bread during the seven days of the feast. In verses fifteen and nineteen it states that anyone who ate anything with yeast during the Feast of Unleavened Bread was to be cut off from the people of God. The point of this harsh judgement is to remind God's people that sin is a big deal, and that one of the defining marks of God's people is their complete commitment to the eradication of sin in their lives, in their homes, and in their nation.

It also serves as a reminder that this is why Jesus came into the world. As John the Baptist said to the people, in reference to Jesus, "behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

This is the message of the Feast of the Unleavened Bread. It is a reminder to God's people that God is not slow in keeping His promises. Even though we face trials and tribulations and sometimes life gets so hard that we find ourselves feeling that there is no hope, and yet, the Feast of Unleavened Bread reminds us that God's salvation is at hand. In the moment when we least expect it, in a manner that we would think to be impossible, God will bring salvation. God will save us from sin.

While this is not the language we often use to describe the adversity that we face in life, Scripture reminds us that all the troubles of life are rooted in sin, and only through its removal will we find salvation. This is why we are called as God's people to resist sin with everything that we have. And this is why Christ came into the world. This is why he was beaten, bruised, striped, pierced, and broken. All these things are at the heart of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. In its essence, it is a parable that brings to us the gospel message. May we hear it. May we believe it. May we find freedom from sin. May we find hope. May we find life.