

Exodus 12:1-14

As we continue our preaching series through the book of Exodus we come today upon the story of the Passover. While in Egypt as slaves, the Israelites were told by God through Moses to place the blood of a lamb on their doorposts in order to save their children, in order that they would be passed over and no harm or death would come to them. It was that very morning following the night of Passover that they made their escape out of slavery, leaving their homes so quickly that the bread they took, the matzah, was baked without leaven because it didn't have time to rise. This is why they were given instructions on how to eat the Passover meal that included this statement:

"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."

This word for Passover is a Hebrew word: "Pesach" - which means literally a passing over or a "sparing from calamity." Pesach.

In Jewish tradition, to retell a story like this from Scripture in one's community was to in some very real way take part in it, and so everyone throughout generations who has ever celebrated the festival of Passover has taken part and participated in God's great liberation of God's people out of slavery. In other words, Passover is not a memorial; it is a reliving of God's grace.

Christian worship and the sacrament of Holy Eucharist finds its source in the Passover Seder meal as well - which is believed (though at times argued by scholars) to be the meal Jesus celebrated during the Last Supper with his disciples that set the stage for our understanding of Jesus as the "pesach" - the paschal lamb who takes away the sins of the world by taking our calamities upon himself - allowing us to be spared the calamity that sin and death would otherwise be for us by bringing us into a place of forgiveness, reconciliation, and of course, resurrection.

But all of us have moments of pass-over in our lives - when we are spared a calamity of one sort or another, like Moses and the Israelites, by being saved by the grace of God and by those who reached out and graciously helped us in our hour of need. What are the stories of pass-over in your life? Your times of rescue?

There is a tale in my family of a pass-over that we retell and re-live every time we hear it. When my mother was 9 months pregnant with me, just days before my birth, she and my father went to see an airshow on the air force base where my father was stationed in Sacramento. At the end of the airstrip was a Farrell's Ice Cream Parlor and they had decided to get ice cream after the show. As they arrived my mother suddenly felt ill and, being so pregnant, determined she just needed to go home and lie down instead. When they walked through the door at home the phone was ringing. It was my maternal grandmother calling to ask if they were all right....because an F-82 jet failed to take off the runway and had just crashed and exploded inside that Farrell's ice cream parlor, killing or injuring almost everyone inside. Our family feels as though we narrowly escaped this calamity by the grace of God. An eye witness to the crash said in the newspaper, "Only a few seconds before there was a big line of traffic where the plane crossed Freeport Boulevard. But the light changed and there was a break in the traffic. That was a miracle to me."

Despite what a terrible tragedy that was, there were also miracles that day. Life is often this way.

As we look at Texas in the 33 counties hit by Hurricane Harvey where 30,000 people need shelter and over 70 have died in the flooding, our hearts break. At the same time, over 72,000 people were rescued either by rescue services or by countless neighbors and Good Samaritans lending their hands, time, and boats to help the stranded. People have also responded in unprecedented ways by donating money and resources to those in need. We are left with that odd overlapping of tragedy and grace all at the same time. Consider the death toll of less than 100 people in comparison to the 72,000 people rescued who might otherwise have died - and it is staggering. Noticing the grace in a tragedy should not diminish the devastation for those who are suffering - but it can remind us of God's presence in all things.

And we are called to celebrate the pass-over moments of life, not because they are devoid of tragedy- it is the tragedy that makes the pass-overs stand out and causes us to give thanks. Whenever those pass-over moments happen, our response should be to wake up, praise God, and then renew our commitment to doing the work God has given us to do for as long as God gives us to time to live and breathe on this earth.

In order to move out and into mission following our pass-overs, we have to be ready just as the Israelites

were ready to experience God's salvation, with our loins girded, our sandals on your feet, and our staff in our hand. Girding one's loins was quite important if you wanted to move quickly in those days – because one's tunic was too long and would prevent you from doing anything requiring great movement – from running to fighting to labor – and it involved tucking and folding one's tunic fabric up above one's knees. If you would like to know more about how to gird up your loins – you'll be glad to know, as our new Minister of Music Alex Benestelli informed me this past week, that there are in fact several graphics and a YouTube how-to video available online for you to watch on the subject.

But applying it to us today, 1 Peter tells us to “gird up the loins of your mind” – in other words, prepare your mind for some serious activity and work so that you'll be prepared to serve God freely and readily in whatever way you are called. The second instruction is to have your sandals on your feet so that you'll be ready to walk right out the door (and trust me, as a mother of two young children – putting on one's shoes can take a verrrrry long time and has been known to be the cause of being late more than once). So having your feet ready, ready to run the race God has set before you, sandals on, is about being ready to serve whenever we are called, with walking staff in hand. The image I have of our call as people of God who have, each one of us, been called to minister and serve others in God's name at any moment, is like a fire fighter who must be both physically and mentally prepared at all times for their emergency call. As people of God, we are to be ready for God's salvation and the work of the Gospel.

You've probably seen some of the images of rescue and assistance that have come out of Texas from people who saw a need and responded immediately to the crisis or to those groups and individuals who have helped out in other ways – these are the people who have their loins girded, sandals on their feet, staff in hand. And this is the kind of response we are to have to God's salvation and healing - to the pass-overs we experience in our lives...because this is our mission as the people of God who have been rescued and redeemed.

Amen.