

Baruch Atah Ado-nai, Elo-heinu Melech Ha-olam:  
Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe

These words come from the blessing spoken in a Jewish household at the beginning of the Passover Seder meal and tonight, on this Maundy Thursday, we are invited to recall the story of Passover and the Last Supper when Jesus instituted the sacrament of Holy Communion. Jesus continually sought to teach the purpose and spirit behind the commands and traditions of the Jewish faith – to reveal the purpose behind the practices of the faith. We see this over and over again in the Gospels and the night he celebrated Passover with his disciples was no exception. Think about some of his key teachings for a moment: Jesus explains the spirit behind commands like “thou shalt not murder” as being a prohibition against hatred and then expands on the traditional teaching to “love your neighbor” to include love even of one’s enemies in parables like the Good Samaritan. When it came to understanding the Sabbath laws Jesus criticized the practices of his day– of following rules that had been created to keep the Sabbath because they had become so legalistic they even prohibited helping people on the sabbath because that was considered “work” and not “rest.” Jesus overtly breaks these sabbath rules by intentionally healing and feeding people on the sabbath saying, “the sabbath was made for people, not people for the sabbath” – bringing everyone back to the point behind the command of taking sabbath rest.

When Jesus cleanses the Temple of the animals and money changers he is doing the same thing – reminding everyone the purpose of the Temple as a House of God for worship – not a money-making enterprise and certainly not a place to cheat people of their money. So, on the night of the Passover celebration during his last supper with his followers, Jesus wanted to be sure to impart his most important teachings because he knew he was to be arrested and crucified in the hours to come. As soon as the supper ends Jesus will go to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray as he awaits his arrest – he bids his follower to “wait and watch” with him. Tonight our chapel is set up like the garden of Gethsemane with an altar of repose so that we can go and pray as we wait and watch with Jesus. So what was it that Jesus was teaching us almost 2,000 years during that Seder meal?

First, we read Jesus made plans to celebrate Passover as the last meal he would have with his followers in a special location – a large guest room in Jerusalem called the “Upper Room.” Then Jesus and his followers gather and share in the Passover meal and, as is traditional in

that meal, Jesus took the opportunity to teach, being the rabbi that he was. The Passover meal or Seder involves a liturgical retelling of the Exodus account, the redemption of the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt culminating in the crossing of the Red Sea and into the Promised Land. This is why read the Passover story from Exodus chapter 12 every Maundy Thursday. The point here is to remind us that God is the one who saves us out of bondage – God is our liberator and redeemer. The Paschal lamb was the sacrifice made by God’s people on the night of their deliverance from Egypt and its blood was placed on the lintels of the doors in order for the families to be “passed over” and protected during the 10th and final plague– the death of the firstborn.

During the Passover meal four cups are blessed and represent the four expressions of deliverance promised by God in Exodus chapter 6: "I will bring out," "I will deliver," "I will redeem," and "I will take." Listen to Exodus 6:6-7 which reads: Say therefore to the people of Israel, 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.

Some of the other components of the Seder include the sweet charoset, a reminder of the mortar and clay used to build and make bricks while the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt. The bitter herbs representing the bitterness of slavery and, of course, the matzo bread – the unleavened bread - symbolizing both the humble circumstances of servitude as well as the haste in which the Israelites had to leave Egypt – so much so they couldn’t wait for the bread to rise.

As Jesus celebrates Passover with his followers we read about him lifting up and offering the cup of wine followed by the bread - the matzo – these being at their core reminders of God’s redemptive work for his people. But this time in the context of the Last Supper, we hear that God’s redemption is coming through Christ himself -that Jesus is offering up his body and his blood to be sacrificed -to be killed, in much the same way as the Paschal Lamb was sacrificed in order for God to Pass-over his people. For Jesus and his followers, however, this Passover, this exodus, is of a spiritual nature: to free us from our slavery and bondage to sin. Whether we like to admit it or not, we all find ourselves at different points enslaved to that which brings either

spiritual or literal death – like harmful habits, long standing unforgiveness, addictions, dishonesty, hatred, anger and hostility. Whatever it is that binds us – the point Jesus is making here is that God has provided us a way out – freedom. It was freedom for God’s people in Egypt and now it is freedom for God’s people from sin and death.

At this meal Jesus also washes the feet of his disciples, an act that only a lowly servant would have performed, thereby giving us a simple but powerful example of his love. And then Jesus summarizes all the law and the prophets into one simple command, one simple mandate (which is where get the Latin word “Maundy” from). Jesus says this, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

My friends- this is the heart and crux of our faith. God frees and redeems us in Christ so that we can follow the command to love one another as God loves us. That is the point of Jesus, of the Last Supper, of the cross, and of the resurrection. God saves us so that we can freely love others.

When we celebrate Holy Communion -the Eucharist – we are taking part in God’s saving work. In Jewish tradition, when the story of the Exodus is recalled, everyone gathered is understood to be taking part in the liberation of God. The story applies to those present: not just to the ancient ancestors. In our worship, in the liturgy and the Eucharistic prayer – we do the same thing. We retell the stories of salvation history- we remember that God has saved God’s people throughout time and God also saves us. This story is also our story. We take the bread – and our Communion bread is, like the matzo, unleavened bread, reminding us of our own humble beginnings, and we take the wine, we lift up the cup and we bless it – and we tell the story of what God has done for us in Christ’s sacrifice. We have been freed from the slavery of sin and we have been redeemed through the offering of Jesus’ body and blood. As a people who have been forgiven and redeemed we are called to walk in the way of love – to love God and one another in all that we do, just as God in Christ loves us. This is what we affirm every time we eat the bread and drink the cup of wine of Holy Communion together – we give thanks for the salvation God has brought us. As we leave, it’s our turn to show love to others. Amen.