**Exodus 12:1-14** March 23, 2016

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Maundy Thursday

*Exodus 12:1 The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in Egypt, 2“This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year. 3Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household. 4If any household is too small for a whole lamb, they must share one with their nearest neighbor, having taken into account the number of people there are. You are to determine the amount of lamb needed in accordance with what each person will eat. 5The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect, and you may take them from the sheep or the goats. 6Take care of them until the fourteenth day of the month, when all the people of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight. 7Then they are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses where they eat the lambs. 8That same night they are to eat the meat roasted over the fire, along with bitter herbs, and bread made without yeast. 9Do not eat the meat raw or cooked in water, but roast it over the fire—head, legs and inner parts. 10Do not leave any of it till morning; if some is left till morning, you must burn it. 11This is how you are to eat it: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the Lord’s Passover.*

*12“On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn—both men and animals—and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the Lord. 13The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt.*

*14 “This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord—a lasting ordinance.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**My Favorite Meal**

Thanskgiving – Turkey. Easter – Ham. Halloween – Candy. Your answers may vary, but special days require special meals. Over the years our family has adopted a New Year’s Eve food tradition. Last year we didn’t follow it, and Lisa and I heard complaints that we didn’t keep the New Year’s food tradition. Certain special days simply demand certain special food.

The biggest religious celebration of the Jewish year is Passover. With unvarying monotony, every single Jew has the same thing on the table for Passover: mutton, lamb. Was it like Thanksgiving turkey or Easter ham? A special Jewish food for a special holiday?

I would say, “No. It’s way more than mere tradition.” The Passover food is rooted in a history which every Jew knew. In fact, following Exodus chapter 12, part of the mandated tradition for Passover is that a child asks, “Why are we doing this?” Every year it is explained in full. If a child asked why you eat a certain food at Thanksgiving, Christmas or Easter, could you explain it? (By the way, we have no documentation that the Pilgrims ate turkey at the first Thanksgiving.)

The Jew and the Passover is quite another thing. Passover food is very specific. It was chosen for a specific reason that has not been forgotten in the 3,500 years since.

Exodus chapter two tells us the background, *“The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them”* (23-25).

So he drafted an unwilling man, Moses, into his service. Through Moses, the Lord struck Israel’s slavemasters, the Egyptians, with nine plagues. (Now some of you are saying, “But Pastor, in Sunday School I learned that there were ten plagues.” Just let me finish the story!)

So nine different times Moses went to the king of the Egyptians, the Pharoah, and he said, *“This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says, ‘Let my people go!’”* (5:1, et al.) And each time Pharaoh said, “No!” And then the Lord did something to stubborn Pharaoh. At first it was nasty, but not really a tradgedy. At first the water in the rivers turned to blood. Pharaoh was not impressed. “No! They will not go.” Then there were frogs everywhere, even in the houses. “No!” Then gnats and flies. “No!” And then the plagues started to get serious. The livestock of the Egyptians were struck with an epidemic and died. “No!” Boils broke out on all the people, then a tremendous hailstorm, then locusts and finally three days of darkness like night.

After those nine plagues, even though his people suffered greatly, and his land was in ruins, Pharaoh refused to free the Israelites from slavery. He shouted at Moses, *“Get out of my sight! The day you see my face you will die!”* (10:28). And then Moses announced the Lord’s tenth and most terrible plague, the plague on the firstborn. *“This is what the Lord says: ‘About midnight I will go throughout Egypt. Every firstborn son in Egypt will die… But among the Israelites not a a dog will bark at any man or animal.’”*

Immediately after that, in our reading, God said through Moses, ***“Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his family… The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect… Take care of them until the fourteeth day of the month, when all the people of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight. Then they are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses… That same night they are to eat the meat roasted over the fire… On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn… The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you.”*** (3-13, selected)

The central feature of the entire ritual is a lamb. Of course, it wasn’t like now. Need a lamb? Check out Krogers, maybe they have a few. Sold out? Try Curren’s Meat Market. I’d hate to have to drive all the way to Louisville… For the Israelites, these were their own lambs. It was convenient, except… these people were poor shepherds. In the year since the last lambing season, each shepherd knew the sheep in his herd that showed promise. The year-old male that was perfect in form, strong in body, no defects or weakness. That animal was their bank account. They could sell it for cash when they needed it, or they would use it to build the herd. That perfect lamb had survived its first year and now weighed maybe 60 or 80 pounds. “Moses, which one did the Lord say we should butcher?” “That one. The good one. The pleasure of your shepherd eyes. The one you have been making plans over.” I imagine that, at least at first, a few of those Israelites were not eager to part with one of the best animals in their herd.

But it was fitting. What the Lord gave to Israel was no beggarly gift. He was giving them life, freedom. He was giving them birth as a nation. It was fitting that sincere thanks be offered.

Yet there was more. Not only was the lamb a thank offering and meal for the family, the lamb was actually what saved them. When they slaughterd the lamb, they were to take the blood from the lamb and crudely paint it above and around the door of the house. That blood would keep the angel of death from entering.

What could all this teach an Israelite about their relationship to God? Of course, the most straightforward understanding is that gave them their freedom and independence as a nation. But there is spiritual truth in this Passover lamb.

The Passover lamb clarified their relationship to God. It was not that the Israelites were somehow so morally superior and valuable that God had to save them. If the Israelites were so superior, no sacrifice would have been made. God did not *have to* save them, he chose to. That is how love works. Love is not love when you have to do something for someone. It is love when you choose to. Israel was always to remember that: it was God’s *choice* that they were saved, a loving choice.

Another point this Passover lamb taught the Israelites is that God saves by substitution. If the point guard just isn’t making his shots, you put in a sub. If the opener isn’t hitting the strike zone, you bring in a relief pitcher. And when the Israelite was unable to make right his own sin, God required a substitute offering. Here it is, the Passover lamb. The Passover lamb is a sign that God’s justice, can be satisfied by a substitute payment for our sin. Substitution was the principle every Israelite could see in the Passover. Instead of their firstborns, God simply required this lamb.

In the New Testament, there is a Bible passage that says, *“The Law is a shadow of the good things that are coming”* (Hebrews 10:1). All these strange Old Testament rules and regulations have at their core, truths (shadows) that still apply in the New Testament, in our time. They are shadows. In that way God was preparing Israel for Jesus, their Savior. Our big advantage is that we know the “reality”. It is Jesus Christ. But we too can acquire a fuller understanding of him if we from time to time look at the shadows.

The Passover Lamb’s blood is what saved every household of the Israelites. The Apostle Peter had this in mind when he wrote, *“It was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed… but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.”* (1 Peter 1:18-19). The Passover Lamb is a picture of Christ. He is the perfect sacrifce offered in our place, when it was we who were to be punished for our sins. With Jesus the Passover Lamb, God gladly welcomes us as his dear children.

The Passover Lamb not only teaches us about our Savior, it also teaches us about an important New Testament meal.

Imagine being an Israelite that first Passover night. You are in your house, eating this strange meal of roasted lamb, and bitter greens and flat bread. You eat the meal standing up not sitting. You have a walking stick in one hand. The garment which normally falls below your knees is hiked up so that when the Lord tells you to that you were free, you can run for freedom like horses when the gates open at Churchill Downs.

What could such a strange meal possibly teach us in 21st century America? Do you remember the last food that Jesus ate before his death? It was this Passover feast. The last sustenance for his body that would give him strength to trudge to the place of crucifixion and death was the bread and mutton and greens and wine of the Passover.

The original Passover was the moment in Egypt when God gave birth to the Israelite nation. On that night he served notice to the Egyptians that he was taking custody of the Israelites as his divinely adopted children. Every subsequent Passover was a celebration of that adoption.

In the middle of that memorial meal, Jesus said to his believers, *“This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you”* (Luke 22:20). Here he took the old and wonderful festival of Passover, and he brought it to a new level. On the night Jesus did something greater than had been done in the Exodus, Jesus commanded a new meal in place of the Passover meal. He instituted Holy Communion.

In Holy Communion, the Passover finds its completion, its fulfillment. In the same way that Jesus was a fulfillment of the Passover Lamb, so Holy Communion is a fulfillment of the Passover feast itself.

The bread and wine, together with Christ’s body and blood is a special meal for a special time. It remembers not the defeat of slavemasters, but defeat of Satan and sin. May all who come forward for this favorite meal of Christians understand why we celebrate this feast. May you be prepared for the great blessings God gives in this meal. Amen.