

“Claiming the Vital Role of Rituals”

Exodus 12:1-14

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What do you think of when you hear the word *ritual*? For many people it is a word that points to meaningless behavior that silly people, mostly silly older people, engage in because they think they must. A ritual is something old and dusty. It is something many Baptists point to as what is wrong with the more liturgical churches — they have too many rituals. In other words, while a ritual may not quite be a plague, like COVID-19, it is not something you want to have or do.

And yet, rituals are a central part of life. They provide ballast and thus enable us to withstand uncertainties. They remind us of who we are. They fill us with hope. We have rituals in every part of life, not just religious life — what we do the last night of a vacation at the beach, what we do around the campfire in the mountains. The Chapmans have a last-call ritual, a whistle that all of our German Shepherds have learned to hear as an invitation to go out and be good one last time before bed, though our current female, Rika, thinks the whistle means she is supposed to attack our current male, Tusker, playfully, of course...

But rituals give us stability, a sense of constancy, and sacred rituals not only remind us of who we are, they remind us Whose we are. They remind us of the many ways God has sustained us in the past and thus they assure us that we can trust God with the future. Ritual behavior we do not understand can seem empty, but rituals connected to our personal experience are a vital part of life we need to claim. And lest we become too critical of others, let me hasten to say that we Baptists have many more rituals that we realize — like the RA Car Race and the GA Tea, the Hanging of the Greens and Toy Joy, believer’s baptism by immersion. Try changing any of these rituals and see what happens!

The reading from Exodus 12 establishes a central ritual of Judaism and it provides insight into not just this one sacred feast but many other

rituals as well. If it seems familiar, it should. We read it every Maundy Thursday, without all the gory details, as this feast provides the background for our understanding of the Last Supper and the celebration of communion. Passover, it is called, referring to God's passing over the homes of the Hebrew people during the last plague in Egypt through which God struck down the firstborn children and animals throughout the land, echoing Pharaoh's command to kill all male Hebrew children.

The Hebrew word — *pesah* — actually has a more complex literary history. It can be translated as “to protect” or “to have compassion” in addition to the more common “to pass over” and the latter is the least common understanding in ancient tradition, according to Jewish scholar Nahum M. Sarna (*Exploring Exodus: The Origins of Biblical Israel*, p. 87). All of these meanings seem to apply to God's care for the people. God protects, has compassion for, and passes over them.

In any event, preparation for the ritual meal, complete with roasted lamb or kid, *matsot* (unleavened bread) and *marorim* (bitter herbs), begins on the tenth day of a new month to be called Nisan (March—April). This first time the meal has to be eaten hurriedly because the people are on the run, but it is to be celebrated every year as a perpetual ordinance. It is a way of remembering who they are — a liberated people, a people delivered from bondage by a mighty and gracious God.

The creation of a new month, a new way of ordering time, beginning with this month, points to the reality that this liberating event, the exodus, defines all of life for these people. No matter what is happening in any given time, they are still God's people, worthy of deliverance and compassion, worth passing over and protecting, though the details of suffering during the Crusades and the Holocaust raise questions about the limits and nature of God's protection. Nonetheless, they are still God's children, and when they are tempted most to doubt this, they share this meal and remember the truth.

It is not clear why the tenth day is chosen, as it is in the seventh month, Tishrei, for another ritual observance — *Yom Kipper*, the Day of Atonement. But every aspect of the feast has meaning — the bitter herbs reflecting the time of struggle in Egypt; the unleavened bread

leaving out yeast which was a symbol of corruption; the one-year-old sheep or goat without blemish, the sacrificial lamb that would become a symbol of Jesus in Christian thought. It is a magnificent ritual through which participants cannot help but be reminded of who and Whose they are.

If you have never been to a Passover Seder and get invited, I encourage you to go. It is a deeply moving experience and a wonderful meal, with many toasts, you should be warned, many toasts. But all the festivity simply deepens the meaning for Jewish people. As they eat and drink, read and pray, they remember that they are people loved and delivered by God — not just in the past, but in the present too.

Passover is not our ritual, but we have many sacred rituals that serve similar purposes, beginning with the fact that we worship on this day of the week. Sunday is not the Sabbath, that is sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. Sunday is the Lord's Day, the day of resurrection, and the fact that we worship on it is not an accident. It is a way of remembering that we are people of the resurrection, we are followers of the Risen Christ. The choice of this day is a ritual act that grounds our shared life in the Jesus story and underscores our hope for eternity.

In addition, the fact that we worship in this sanctuary, if only virtually now, is a ritual act that centers us. We have many memories of this sacred place, memories of times when we knew God was with us. We have dedicated children and grieved the loss of loved ones here. We have been enriched by special services on Maundy Thursday and Christmas Eve, had our spirits lifted by the High Lonesome Mass, and heard glorious sacred works like the Rutter Requiem.

And here we are connected to 208 years of sacred history, 161 of them in this room. We are a part of a church that survived the pandemic of 1918, survived the Civil War and two world wars, learned from the Civil Rights Movement, often through our mistakes. Some view history as an anchor that weighs you own. Our history provides ballast to stabilize us in troubled waters. As we move through this tumultuous time of a pandemic with tragic economic consequences, a renewed awareness of racial injustice, and unprecedented political divisiveness,

we find refuge in space that reminds us that we are a people sustained by a loving God not only in the past, but in the present and the future.

But in addition to this ritual time and space, we have other defining rituals like communion. It is a central event through which we remember who we are and Whose we are, an experience that points to the means of our liberation — the suffering on a cross — a ritual that points to our future hope because when we eat of the bread and drink of the cup, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes (1 Cor. 11:26).

We can read the stories of our faith any time and remember that we are a people shaped by grace. We can teach and preach about our identity as a people who are forgiven and called to forgive. But there is just something about sharing a ritual meal that makes us feel our identity all the way down to our bones. It is partly because Jesus initiated this meal, and partly because of the memories of other times we shared this meal and felt the nearness of God and a closeness to other people.

I will never forget a communion service in Winston-Salem. Every other month, we passed the plate of elements, as we do in normal times here, and on special occasions we practiced intinction, again as we do here, but every other month we came forward and knelt before the cross and received communion. Some people thought it wasn't Baptist to come forward and kneel, it was too ritualistic. But for the majority of people, kneeling before a cross, having a quiet moment to pray next to brothers and sisters in faith, and then, receiving the elements, not taking them, but receiving them as the gift they are, was profoundly moving.

One particular kneeling communion, I served a series of people who had major challenges — health challenges, relationship challenges, work challenges. I was already in a vulnerable place emotionally, an open place spiritually, taking in their need of the bread and the cup, when I came to man who had been angry with me, though not really me. His son, who was my age exactly, had died suddenly, and he was angry with God, but God is hard to get to, especially when we are angry. So, he focused the anger on the closest representative of God — me.

I knew what was going on, but it still didn't feel good, and it hurt to see him in pain. As I approached him, I gently held his shoulder in one hand as I held out the tray of cups with the other and said something

to him, I don't remember what. Suddenly tears began to stream down his face, his whole body relaxed like it had not for all the months since his son's death, and he drank from the cup. We got together that week and forgave each other, and until his death, were very close.

Many things contributed to that experience of healing and reconciliation, but the sacred ritual we call communion created the space for it. There is just something about kneeling before a cross, hearing the words about a body given and blood shed, eating the bread and drinking from the cup, that reminds us who we are.

I think of a Garrison Keillor story about two men in a Brethren church who were at odds (in *Leaving Home*). Nothing seemed capable of bringing them together until Aunt Flo cooked a meal of her famous fried chicken. She didn't have a normal blessing before the meal because she knew they would argue about who should pray. She had a silent prayer during which they tried to outdo each other in silence. So, Flo finally went into the kitchen, got the chicken and gravy and put it on the table. Keillor says she set the hay down where the goats could get it.

At that point, tears ran down both men's faces. "It's true what they say," Keillor says, "Smell is the key that unlocks our deepest memories, and with their eyes closed, the smell of fried chicken and gravy made those men into boys again. It was years ago, they were fighting, and they could hear a mother's voice from on high, saying, 'You two stop it and get in here and have your dinners. Now. I mean it.' The blessed cornmeal crust and rapturous gravy brought the memory to mind, and the stony hearts of the two giants melted; they raised their heads and filled their plates and slowly peace was made over that glorious chicken." Communion is a sacred meal that affects us like this.

I realize that it doesn't seem fair to talk about food so close to mealtime, nor does it seem fair to talk about the sacred ritual of communion when we cannot celebrate it. It is yet another challenge of COVID-19 that we cannot embrace many things that might give us strength. But perhaps we can find a creative way to do so. We have had our first virtual child dedication already and have a second one scheduled. We are going to find a way to celebrate baptism. And there

are safe ways churches have celebrated communion, for example, by using individual element containers at a drive-by service.

I know it sounds like a B-movie version of the ritual at best. But we managed a drive-by celebration for Mary Alice last week (with chocolate chip cookies) and the churches that have celebrated communion this way have been surprised at how moving the experience has been. Sacred rituals are vital. They remind us of who we are and Whose we are. They provide ballast in unsettling times. And they give us hope. We need to do everything we can to claim their place, especially in times like this.