

Who Are We?
 A sermon by David Roquemore
 First Presbyterian Church, Newton, NC
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Exodus 12: 1-14

When the Jewish people sit down to eat the Passover Seder, one of the children present asks, “who are we and where did we come from?” The answer is the recitation of much of this story. They actually ask, “what makes this night different from all other nights?” After this and several similar questions, the full story is told. The Hebrew tradition is a story-telling tradition. And so this story tells them how a group of loosely related tribes with a common ancestor became a united people with one story. God did the things that the story tells, and so becomes their God. And ours, if our story follows out of theirs story.

I remember sitting around my grandparents table after a meal, when the whole family sat and listened to stories they told. My grandfather and his sister used to argue about whether something that happened twenty years before was on a Tuesday or a Wednesday! And halfway through the story, his sister would interrupt, and say, “it had to be a Wednesday, because that was the day we went to the drug store every week,” or something like that. Maybe you can remember family tales like that too!

In King Lear, Shakespeare has Lear say,

So we'll live, And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh at gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues talk of court news, and we'll talk with them too—who loses and who wins, who's in, who's out—and take upon us the mystery of things as if we were God's spies. And we'll wear out in a walled prison packs and sects of great ones that ebb and flow by the moon.

We'll tell old tales, like where we came from, who we are, what influences made us and our family this way and not some other way.

So here in Exodus 12, God tells Moses and Aaron what to do on the tenth day of the month: prepare a lamb a certain way, and eat it quickly, while wearing your cloak, ready to leave. This will be the Passover, when God will “pass through” the land of Egypt and strike down the first born of all the Egyptians, even the animals.

As a child, I found this very disturbing! I am the first-born in my family.

A bit later on in the chapter, God instructs that when the lamb is slaughtered, the people shall paint the doorposts and lintel with the blood of the lamb. The Angel of Death will “pass over” houses so painted, hence the name, “Passover.” Being ready, the people get up and leave as soon as the Egyptians realize the God of the Hebrews has done this. They get up and leave Egypt — but more on that in coming weeks.

This is the great event that answers the question, “why is this night different from all other nights?” “Who are we?” We are the people whom God has delivered from slavery in Egypt and guided through the wilderness to the Promised Land.

And in our own way, in a metaphorical sort of way, God has delivered us from slavery — not in Egypt, but to sin — and guides us to the Promised Land — in this case, life eternal. We understand this story of the Hebrews as applying to us not literally but in Christ. Jesus Christ is the one who brings the message not of death but of life to us. So you might go as far as to say he is the Angel of Life, the messenger of life. Of course, he is more than that, but you could think of him that way, in parallel to the Hebrew story.

Jesus himself makes this connection when he celebrates the Passover with his disciples at the Last Supper. He does the usual things, but interprets them differently. He breaks and passes the bread, but in doing so says, “this is my body broken for you.” He passes the wine — the Seder meal includes at least four glasses of wine — and says, “this is my blood poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins.” Those interpretations didn’t mean much at the moment to the disciples; later, they understood.

His body is like the bread, broken and shared. We share the bread here, so that everyone present can have some. His blood is poured out for us, the way we pour the wine, and again, we all have some. What we have here is just a taste, really, symbolizing a meal. But the taste is enough.

When we eat this bread and drink this wine, we take the elements that are both gifts of God, yet processed by humans. You have to have an oven to bake bread; someone must mix the dough. You have to work the grapes to get wine; time for it to ferment is involved. Both God and human beings are involved in this work.

When we eat this bread and drink this wine, we find that Christ is the one who gives them to us, and he is also the gift! He is the giver and the gift. That answers the question as to how he can be present in the communion, what it means for him to be present, and how he is present? Calvin argued with the Romans Catholics who said the bread and wine became *literally* his body and blood, saying, “how can this be, when his body is at the right hand of God?” We don’t need all this literalism; we need to understand that he is present, that his presence is a mystery, but by his presence we are sustained and strengthened.

I have thought of it sometimes this way: that the bread, when I eat it, goes to become a part of my body, the little bread molecules finding their way into all my cells and tissues, and so give me physical strength. The wine, when I drink it, goes into my bloodstream and disperses his presence throughout my body. That isn’t the most theological way to conceive it, but it helps to think of the elements feeding my body.

God delivered the Hebrew from the Egyptians, and God in Christ delivers us from sin. But how? We say things like, “Jesus sacrificed himself on the cross to pay for our sins,” but what does that actually mean? It sort of parallels the sacrifices that the Hebrews

performed in the Temple at Jerusalem, with Christ's death being the equivalent to the animal sacrifices on the altar.

The Reformers taught that Christ dies in obedience to the will of God, and in that death God satisfied the demands of justice, and so includes us in that death, in our baptism, so that we too walk in new life. We are given new life and righteousness as a gift; we are justified by the grace of God, not by anything we have done.

Well, the witness of the New Testament is too broad and filled with questions on this point; it simply isn't entirely clear how Jesus saves us. I know, a lot of preachers in this town will look at me in horror when they hear that, but it's true. The New Testament witness is broad and includes many testimonies that seem to conflict! But what we do know is this: however the mystery happens, Jesus saves us from sin on the cross, in his death, and gives us new life in his resurrection. We belong to that life in our baptisms and so we rejoice!

Who are we, then? We are the people whom God called together, for no good of our own, and united to Christ Jesus, so that we may live in his love and serve him, doing good and taking care of our fellow human beings. We are the ones who by grace are called his own, and who live in that grace from day to day. We are ones who follow his lead, heading finally and ultimately to the Promised Land.

Thanks be to God in Jesus Christ our Lord! Amen.