

Exodus 12:1-14

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, 2 “This month will be the first month; it will be the first month of the year for you.[a] 3 Tell the whole Israelite community: On the tenth day of this month they must take a lamb for each household, a lamb per house. 4 If a household is too small for a lamb, it should share one with a neighbor nearby. You should divide the lamb in proportion to the number of people who will be eating it. 5 Your lamb should be a flawless year-old male. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats. 6 You should keep close watch over it until the fourteenth day of this month. At twilight on that day, the whole assembled Israelite community should slaughter their lambs. 7 They should take some of the blood and smear it on the two doorposts and on the beam over the door of the houses in which they are eating. 8 That same night they should eat the meat roasted over the fire. They should eat it along with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. 9 Don’t eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over fire with its head, legs, and internal organs. 10 Don’t let any of it remain until morning, and burn any of it left over in the morning. 11 This is how you should eat it. You should be dressed, with your sandals on your feet and your walking stick in your hand. You should eat the meal in a hurry. It is the Passover of the Lord. 12 I’ll pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I’ll strike down every oldest child in the land of Egypt, both humans and animals. I’ll impose judgments on all the gods of Egypt. I am the Lord. 13 The blood will be your sign on the houses where you live. Whenever I see the blood, I’ll pass over you. No plague will destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

14 “This day will be a day of remembering for you. You will observe it as a festival to the Lord. You will observe it in every generation as a regulation for all time.

Psalms 119:33-40

33 Lord, teach me what your statutes are about,
and I will guard every part of them.
34 Help me understand so I can guard your Instruction
and keep it with all my heart.
35 Lead me on the trail of your commandments
because that is what I want.
36 Turn my heart to your laws,
not to greedy gain.
37 Turn my eyes away from looking at worthless things.
Make me live by your way.
38 Confirm your promise to your servant—
the promise that is for all those who honor you.
39 Remove the insults that I dread
because your rules are good.
40 Look how I desire your precepts!
Make me live by your righteousness.

Romans 13:8-14

8 Don't be in debt to anyone, except for the obligation to love each other. Whoever loves another person has fulfilled the Law. 9 The commandments, Don't commit adultery, don't murder, don't steal, don't desire what others have,[a] and any other commandments, are all summed up in one word: You must love your neighbor as yourself.[b] 10 Love doesn't do anything wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is what fulfills the Law.

11 As you do all this, you know what time it is. The hour has already come for you to wake up from your sleep. Now our salvation is nearer than when we first had faith. 12 The night is almost over, and the day is near. So let's get rid of the actions that belong to the darkness and put on the weapons of light. 13 Let's behave appropriately as people who live in the day, not in partying and getting drunk, not in sleeping around and obscene behavior, not in fighting and obsession. 14 Instead, dress yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ, and don't plan to indulge your selfish desires.

Matthew 18:15-20

15 "If your brother or sister sins against you, go and correct them when you are alone together. If they listen to you, then you've won over your brother or sister. 16 But if they won't listen, take with you one or two others so that every word may be established by the mouth of two or three witnesses. 17 But if they still won't pay attention, report it to the church. If they won't pay attention even to the church, treat them as you would a Gentile and tax collector. 18 I assure you that whatever you fasten on earth will be fastened in heaven. And whatever you loosen on earth will be loosened in heaven. 19 Again I assure you that if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, then my Father who is in heaven will do it for you. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, I'm there with them."

Sermon

Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.

Lord, open our hearts, and our lives will sing out your name.

Amen.

INTRODUCTION

God's desire is passover, not punishment. God's desire is restoration, not retribution. However, that might not seem evident in these readings, especially in Exodus 14 or Matthew 18. The Passover of the firstborn Hebrew children seems like an exception God makes to the destruction experienced by the rest of the people and animals in Egypt. In Matthew, Jesus eventually tells his listeners to treat their offenders as Gentiles and tax collectors. Believe it or not, 1st century Hebrews hated taxes even more than we do, and the only people they treated worse than tax

*collectors were Gentiles. But I say it again, God's desire is
Passover, not punishment.*

MOVE ONE - GOD DESIRES LIFE

God doesn't want to punish the Egyptians. Remember that pharaoh has ignored many signs, first a request, then miracles like Moses's staff turning to a snake and the Nile turning to blood, and then plagues of frogs and fleas, swarms of pests and diseased livestock, boils and thundering hail, locusts that ate all their remaining crops and stored foods, all before this final move of death. God doesn't desire this punishment; rather God desires liberation for the Hebrew slaves. God doesn't desire death. God desires life.

Jesus gives us a similar view, that relationships broken by sin will not be abided. God can't stand separation caused

by sin, so Jesus offers us some practical ways to restore life to relationships shaped by death.

Duane Example

MOVE TWO - BAPTISM AS A SIGN OF DEATH AND SACRAMENT OF LIFE

Neither, however, is God afraid of death. In the beginning, God created life out of something worse than death: nonexistence. The power of life belongs to God even before the possibility of life existed. So while death brings God sadness - remember, Jesus weeps for Lazarus and God cries out through the prophets at the deadly direction of Israel's apostasy - God is not defeated by death.

That's why St. Paul reminds us that, when we were baptized, we were baptized into Christ's death and tied to Christ's resurrection. In Luther's words, "we are sunk under the

water, which passes over us, and afterwards are drawn out again. These two parts, to be sunk under the water and drawn out again, signify the power and operation of Baptism. Baptism is putting to death the old Adam, and after that the resurrection of the new person.” We know that we cannot live under water and yet Jesus promises that we’ll experience salvation through this action of faith. The waters that bring new life to God’s good creation also puts to death the sinful thing that rebels against God’s desire for community, for unity.

Death is not the end of God or our end, but the transition into humanity's eternal life. God, our divine father and mother, doesn't desire Jesus to die on the cross, but bears it and then brings a phoenix of abundance out of the ashes of absence. The image of our descent into the waters signifies our own death - the death of everything in us tied to sin and destined for hell. That all is buried in the waters of

our baptism. Jesus not only left his death in that tomb, but laid our death in his grave as well.

It may seem hyperbolic to talk about infighting in the community, about interpersonal dysfunction, as death. However, we all know that churches must work together to thrive. It's impossible for us to become the strong, flexible, vibrant, dynamic community God calls us to be if we're always fighting with one another, if we're always sinning against one another and not repenting, forgiving, or reconciling. Community's not focused on life will mire themselves in death, and so Jesus tells us something simple: confront sin. Don't ignore it. Don't just let it pass. Not to shame someone else. Not to punish them. But to remind the entire church that we're people that live on the Easter side of the tomb. We aren't destined by sin, but delivered and determined by resurrection.

This is one of those areas where Jesus places responsibility both on sinner and victim. The victim isn't at fault, but the injured party has to want reconciliation enough to pursue it with their offender if the community is to thrive. Now, this will look different in different situations. Reconciliation doesn't mean the relationship will be as though the sin didn't happen. It means that we don't need the death of others to satisfy our pain, that we prefer restoration rather than retribution. With our contractor, reconciliation looks like keeping him out of jail and holding him accountable for the theft so that he can learn to work an honest job again and actively work toward restoration of his debt and of his public integrity. There's many more difficult situations, where victims of assault and intimate partner violence face real danger of harm, whether physics, mental, or emotional, if they're in the same space with their offender again, so I don't know exactly what it would look like for them to pursue this kind of restorative

justice that provides opportunity for God's ideal. That's up to them and those they love and trust to help them make those decisions. What I do know is that God pursues new life for us even when we sin against God, and calls us to pursue new life even for those who harm us. Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you. Jesus is consistently annoying with that kind of stuff. Beautifully, aggravatingly, inspiringly annoying.

MOVE THREE - GOD BRINGS NEW LIFE OUT OF DEATH

The juxtaposition of these stories is important. In Exodus, we see God causing the deaths. A final straw, an undesired end, but still a part of the story. In Matthew, though, we see that the conflict suffered by the community isn't God's fault, but the sin between them. It's a good reminder that the story of Exodus is thousands of years older than even Jesus. It's a story of ancient people trying to make sense of why death happens to certain

people and not others. It's a story that intends to communicate God's grace rather than God's wrath, because it's a story that focuses on the salvation God offers, the life that God gives in the face of what seems like certain death.

Similarly, in our human relationships, conflict seems inevitable. We can barely pass between our homes and our destinations without engendering conflict with other drivers or pedestrians. And even when we're at home, we develop tiffs with family, neighbors, truly anyone with whom we live in close proximity. But even here, God brings new life out of death. Our conflicts may foster anxiety and fester like wounds, but God does not abandon us amidst our pain. God does not give up on us, even when we're ready to give up on one another. Not even when we're ready to give up on ourselves.

CONCLUSION

God desires passover, not punishment. God desires restoration, not retribution. For us to participate in those desires, we must be responsive to God's invitation. We must follow God's lead. Our baptismal waters have put to death all of that which rebelled against God and led us out of that slavery into a refreshed, restored, resurrection life. When conflicts come our way, we're not hopeless or helpless. God is with us and has shown us a way toward reconciliation, toward peace, toward abundant life together. We know who God is: A God that desires life. A God unafraid of death. A God who brings new life out of death. The question for us now is this: Who are we? Are we a people that desire life?

In our sermon series for so many months, focusing on the future of the congregation, we've also left something lacking. I've left something lacking, namely, catechetical preaching. What a great word, right? Catechesis simply means religious instruction, often done in preparation for baptism. In our church, without a traditional Sunday school but with an approach to Christian education through small groups and events, we don't have a consistent process of

teaching the basics of the faith outside of our confirmation program. The sermon, for us, provides perhaps the best chance to teach, or for many of you, provide a refresher, on some of our essential beliefs as Lutheran Christians.

So, for the foreseeable future, we'll undertake an approach to teaching that sees how our appointed readings for each Sunday relate to portions of Martin Luther's Large and Small Catechisms.

Good information, to be sure, and it makes sense even. In the act of Baptism,, for But what in the world doe sit have to do with the first Passover?

We'd do well to remember that a positive result is different than a positive story. What we see in the Passover is the brokenness of relationship, between the Egyptians and the Israelites as well as between the Egyptians and God. We see similar brokenness in Matthew 18, a constant reminder of the ways that we sin against one another, frequently, so frequently that Jesus gives one of his relatively few practical teachings on how to make peace with one another.