Getting a Passover

*Exodus 12*

For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. 13The blood [of the lamb] shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. At midnight the Lord struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the prisoner who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock.Pharaoh arose in the night, he and all his officials and all the Egyptians; and there was a loud cry in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead. Then he summoned Moses and Aaron in the night, and said, “Rise up, go away from my people, both you and the Israelites! Go, worship the Lord, as you said. Take your flocks and your herds, as you said, and be gone. And bring a blessing on me too!”

To be honest, I didn’t want to deal with this text. Especially after a week that has been filled with so much loss for us. We lost a pillar in our church, and then we lost a dissenter and a protector in our nation. I mean, isn’t there enough death swirling around us right now? So the last thing we need right now is a story about God sending death’s angel to visit upon one group, while passing over the other. It is an awful story which, when taken literally, holds equally as awful theology. It has been this “God will protect us” kind of magical thinking which opened some churches too early under the auspice of “Faith over Fear.” They thought faith was a shield that would protect them, but COVID along with death still darkened their doors. It goes back to this awful Passover story. So, when it came time to dealing with this story, I would have preferred to get a pass.

But then I started to think that when it comes to dealing with suffering or death, we all would prefer to get a pass over. Of course, we are aware enough to know it is not how life works, but if we could get a pass, I’m pretty certain most of us would take it. When we go to the doctor and suddenly she says she is going to order some tests to make sure it isn’t anything serious, as we sit anxiously waiting, we probably start praying to God for a pass. I remember when our first child was born. There was a point during labor when the baby’s heart rate dropped rapidly. The doctor rushed into the room, looked at the monitor and made an “ut-oh” face. Internally, I began to panic. I prayed that God would spare our first born—that we might be given a pass. It’s normal. Even Jesus in the garden, on the night of Passover, asks God that the cup might pass over him. We know it isn’t how life works, but when it comes to death and suffering, we all would like a pass over.

So how do we handle the story? After all, we must remember it is a story. And when we peel back the literalism we unearth an important question: What is it going to take for the oppressor to let go of oppression? What is it going to take to shift the mindset of a system that is dependent on supremacy and the degrading of human lives? Ten plagues ransacked Egypt. Hail flattened crops. Livestock became diseased. A black out froze the economy as people were forced to shelter-in-place. After all of this, Pharaoh’s heart remains a brick wall. He still lives with the illusion that he can push God’s mercy while continuing to exploit God’s people. So underneath this awful story is the question: what is it going to take for the oppressor to stop sowing death?

It’s our question too, isn’t it? In one news cycle we hear the west coast is an inferno under smoky crimson skies. Half a million people are displaced from Oregon. Meanwhile, the 3rd hurricane is about to hit the Gulf; while five more tropical storms are brewing in the Atlantic. What is it going to take to change our mindset from exploiting creation to realizing that if we don’t act faster than we have ever acted before we are all going to suffer? What is it going to take? Or watch the continuing protests. After a long summer of injustice a few have escalated into riots. Back in the 60’s Dr. King said that riots are the “language of the unheard.” Underneath is the same question: What is it going to take for the oppressor to let go of their oppressive ways? It the question in the story; and it is the question today.

Well, here’s a thought. At some point we are going to have to acknowledge that oppression impacts everyone. It not only robs the oppressed of their humanity, but it costs the oppressor their humanity as well.

Do you remember back in the first chapter, when Pharaoh was threatened by the growing number of Hebrews, so being the insecure leader that he was, he wrote a policy which legalized the slaughtering of Hebrew baby boys. Now at the climax of the story, the oppressor is experiencing the exact same kind of oppression. But what if this isn’t a story about God getting even, but a deeper truth that when it comes to oppression, everyone loses. When oppressed group’s humanity gets exploited, eventually the oppressor’s humanity gets striped away as well.

So I have a confession: I am realizing that somewhere along the way, I unconsciously made a deal with white supremacy. The deal is: If I accept my proximity to its power—and as long as I am loyal to it and do not challenge it—I will continue to receive its benefits and protection. I will continue getting a pass. It is a deal which is written on my flesh and has been rehearsed throughout history. So, what I think it is going to take for us to begin to write a new story is a shift in our understanding. We who benefit from white supremacy, are going to have to examine how we’ve become oppressed by the system as well.

During the Apartheid, Desmond Tutu, once told a group of white allies, “If you are here because you want to free Black people, then please go back home. But if you are here because you realize you need to be free, then please join us.” You see, when we march or vote. When we say Black Lives Matter or dig into anti-racist work. As we speak out against brutality, we are NOT doing it because Black people need us to save them. We are doing it because we realize we need to be saved! I need to be saved and my children need to be saved from white supremacy. The love of God longs to free all of us from the system which claims to offer some of us a pass, while in actuality it is robbing all of us of life.

At the end of the day no one gets a pass. It dehumanizes the oppressed while robbing the soul of the oppressor. And as a 1st century street preacher once said to his faithful disciples, what good is it to gain all the benefits of the world if it ends up costing you your soul?