

Sermon Maundy Thurs Apr 1, 2021
Redeemer, Ramsey
Pastor M Linderman

Grace Mercy and Peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Robert Jenson, the well-known Lutheran theologian who died recently in 2017, came up with a wonderful formula that was intended to identify in one sentence the God whom Christians believe in. He said, the God whom we believe in is the God who, having rescued the Israelites from Egypt, also raised Jesus Christ from the Dead.

Jenson's formula emphasizes that we don't believe in some vague idea of God as an impersonal higher power or pristine spirit above and beyond, or maybe in all things. Anybody can believe in that God. And actually, lots of people do. According to recent polling, just under 90% of Americans believe either in a god or in some higher power. But for Christians, the God whom we have come to believe in has done two things that are critical for understanding who God is. We believe God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt more than 3000 years ago, and we believe this God is the very same God who raised Jesus from the grave on the first Easter, some 2000 years ago.

These two acts of salvation are part of God's self-revelation in the world. Now, God is revealed in many different ways in the world, such as through the beauty of creation, or the reality of love in human experience. But this is a general, universal revelation about who God is. It is for anybody and everybody to see and believe in. However, the fact that God chose to work closely with a particular people, and save them from bondage and make them a nation, and then through them raise up a messiah who brings salvation to all, that is something we learn from God's very personal, particular self-revelation in the history of Israel and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And today, on Maundy Thursday of Holy Week, these two stories of God's self-revelation come together in the account of Jesus' last supper with his disciples. On this first of the Holy 3 days, the first thing we hear out of the Bible is the account of the Exodus of the Israelites. It is the account of God's first act of

salvation, of Moses leading the people from slavery, through the Red Sea and onto dry land, so that they may continue their journey to the promised land. In the part of that story which we have in our first lesson today, God commands each Jewish family to slaughter a lamb, prepare it, and eat it while prepared to leave the house at any minute. Their bread must not contain yeast because they can't wait for it to rise. They must eat wearing their traveling clothes. And they must smear the blood of the slaughtered lamb on their door posts so that the angel of Death will Pass over their houses. Then the Angel of Death comes that night, bringing devastating losses to all the houses and families of Egypt. It is the night of Israel's deliverance from the bondage of slavery. It is the night of the establishment of their freedom. That freedom is marked, literally, by their passing through the Red Sea on dry ground. Like dirty garments that go through the wash and come out clean, the Israelites go through the sea as slaves and come out free on the other side. They are no longer owned by others. They are their own nation, their own people, and this night is the beginning of that new identity as God's people.

So God also commands the Israelites to mark this event in time through a perpetual ordinance, a permanent, annual, ritual meal that they are to eat in this first month of the Jewish year. Although Rosh Hashanah has become the cultural new year in the Jewish religion, the Jewish exodus event is technically the start of a new time for the nation, making them a new people. And their observance of this ordinance is one of the first acts of their freedom.

When many years later, Jesus of Nazareth enters Jerusalem to the joyous welcome of peasants and children, and meets with his disciples in an upper room to celebrate this Passover meal, this perpetual ordinance, it is heavy with the symbolism of that first saving event. This is the content of the second story of God's salvation, according to the Gospel accounts of Jesus' passion. Instead of the charge to "observe this meal as a perpetual ordinance," Jesus tells his disciples to "do this in remembrance of me." He says of the ritual bread, "this is now my body." He lifts the ritual cup and declares that it is now the cup of the new covenant, in his blood, shed for the forgiveness of sin. And then, to show them how to love and serve each other, he washes their feet. It is as if to say that the work of Jesus' death and resurrection washes his disciples clean, and brings them to new freedom in which they can serve God as God's people.

When we come to trust in these two saving events together, we can say that we see God and understand God clearly. We believe that we see God as God wants to be seen. The God of Jesus is the same God who saved the Israelites and made of them a new people. In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, whom we believe to be God's messiah, we see the God who saves all people and grants faith to the church, to be his new people. In both stories, bondage holds the people back, but God's saving work frees them to become a new people, who are freed not for selfish living, but for serving the purposes of God.

In both stories, God's saving act is symbolized in the meal itself. And in the echoes of baptism that resonate between the two stories, the people are washed clean and set on solid ground. Their ordeal is over. Their time of justification has begun. They are now free to start being who God has called them to be.

I hope you understand, dear friends, that you and I are also those people. We find ourselves again and again bound to the power of sin and death in our lives. We are bound to sin in our own personal thoughts, words and deeds, but we are also bound to the corporate sin of our society. We are all stuck in our own Egypt, caught on the wrong side of the Red Sea. We do not escape the need for God's intervention by trying ever harder to be "good people", we cannot save ourselves. But we acknowledge God's wisdom in rescuing us by raising Jesus from the dead. When we greet this proclamation in faith and trust, we agree to God's judgement, and we agree to God's plan. And every Lord's day here after, we gather again and again around the elements of this meal that become for us the body and blood of our Lord. Taking, blessing, eating, and drinking, our bodies become one with his body. That body on Friday may die, but on Easter will rise. And we wait in hope for the full redemption of our world, and in the meantime live in that hope, serving the God who has done it all for us.

May the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.