"The Lord's Passover and the Lord's Supper"
Exodus 12:1-14

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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Boise, Idaho
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I. The Lord's Passover

There was no question in the minds of the Israelites that they lived in a brutal world.

They were slaves-as their ancestors had been slaves before them for 400 years. There was no good reason for this: The Egyptians had one day decided that, rather than risk the Israelites taking over, it would be better to enslave them, force them into hard labor, treat them harshly. It had been so for centuries, and lately had only grown only more vicious. Forty years ago, Pharaoh had decreed that all the baby boys of Israel be thrown into the river and killed; yet by the hand of God, the Israelites still prospered. Recently, with the return of Moses, Pharaoh had increased their workload to beat them down, making a hard life even harder.

Was it fair? Dear friends, it doesn't matter. One thing we often fail to understand is that this world is far less about fairness and far more about Pharaoh. People seek to dominate other people and get their way; a fair society, where everyone treats each other equally and rules are unnecessary, is a figment of human philosophy. It's the stuff dreamed up by those with too much time on their hands and too much ease in their life. The Israelites were under no such illusions: Life was brutal, and death was always at the door.

Yes, don't even imagine trying to persuade those Israelites that life is really good, that people are okay, that beliefs and practices don't really matter. They had too many scars and welts and sorrows to fall for such silly talk. The brutality of life made their vision very clear.

Still, there was hope: The Lord had afflicted Egypt now with nine acts of judgment, plagues of blood to water, lice, frogs, flies, hail, and the like. It was certainly satisfying to see the Egyptians afflicted for once, but was it all that comforting? The plagues declared that God was an angry God, but did they do much to show His mercy? How would God eventually treat the people of Israel? The answer comes with the tenth plague and the Passover meal.

As the Lord commands the Passover, He gives very specific instructions and rules. The lamb is to selected on the 10th day of the month and killed on the 14th at twilight. The blood of the lamb is to be put on the lintel and the doorposts of each home. The lamb is to be roasted-not boiled or eaten raw, and there are to be no leftovers. The people are to eat the meal dressed in traveling clothes, hurried and ready to go. Furthermore, the Lord goes on to say, this is a meal only for His people: No foreigners are allowed (12:43).

The instructions are specific because a specific judgment is on the way: The Lord is about to go through Egypt, and He will take the life of every firstborn male-human or livestock-where He doesn't find blood on the door. However, He will pass over the homes where He finds the blood of

the lamb. That night, the firstborns will be spared; following that night, all of Israel will be delivered.

When the night has passed and the judgment has taken place, the Lord commands Israel to celebrate the Passover every year, so that they do not forget how He brought them out of Egypt. It is as if He says, "Do this in remembrance of Me. For as oft as you eat this lamb and celebrate this meal, you proclaim My grace until I come."

Now, I do not mean to be trivial nor a smart aleck. But I venture to ask you this: Do you think that the Israelites were tempted to tinker with the Lord's instructions for the Passover? Perhaps wait for the meal until the 15th day of the month, or roast beef instead of lamb? Or invite the foreigners whom God had forbidden from the meal? Or just pretend to put blood on the doorposts and the lintel, but avoid the messiness of doing so? I daresay that the answer is no. Why?

Because the Lord Himself makes clear: "It is the Lord's Passover" (12:11). He does not leave the meal up to them; it is His meal, and He sets the menu and the rules. After nine plagues and a promised tenth, there are likely few-if any!-who believe that God encourages freedom of expression and artistic license when it comes to His commands. What He says goes.

Furthermore, this is no academic exercise, no "let's pretend." The stakes are life and death, nothing less. If they start to tinker with the meal, they can't be sure if it is still the Lord's Passover or not; and if they're not sure about that, they can't be sure that their firstborn sons will be alive the next morning. They certainly aren't about to risk that.

However, we do the Passover a great injustice if we only speak of the dangers of disobeying God. The meal is the meal of life. The Israelites know that the world is no friend, that they are slaves in Egypt, and that they face death in slavery without the Lord's help. On the other hand, the Lord promises life and deliverance through this meal and His hand.

Do you see? There are two reasons to celebrate the Passover just as God says. One is obedience to Him: His ways are always right and true, and to disobey Him means sin and death-sooner or later. But the other is because the Lord's Word promises benefits: Life and deliverance from slavery. In the end, the Israelites don't celebrate Passover out of fear of an angry God; they celebrate it because He is rescuing them from their slavemasters and enemies.

The Israelites celebrate the Lord's Passover, just as He commands, and the outcome is clear the next morning. Death and mourning envelop all of Egypt, and Israel is released from slavery.

Why? Because of the Lord and His Passover. Because, according to His Word, lambs were slaughtered and blood was shed for life and salvation.

And because the Passover points to the Lamb of God who is coming, to take away the sins of the world.

II. The Lord's Supper

Looking back at the brutality and the mortality of the times in Exodus 12, we might well breathe a sigh of relief. Although such horrors as slavery still exist here and there across the world, we live in

a pretty civilized time and life isn't near as brutal and terrible as it used to be. In fact, it's relatively easy to disconnect from the children of Israel in Exodus 12: These are simply different times.

However, they are not much that different. Even as the Passover Lamb foretold Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, the slavery of Israel in Egypt is intended to send a warning of the slavery that Jesus died to free us from: Slavery to sin.

Jesus Himself declares, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin" (John 8:34). Sometimes, we can see this to be true, for the chains are obvious, the prison walls evident, and the suffering apparent: Consider the drug addict, whose enslavement to narcotics results in ruin and finally death. Consider any addiction, for we can easily associate this with being enslaved to an evil master.

However, we must be on our guard, for slavery to sin is often quite enjoyable and acceptable in our modern day. Too often, the chains of sin feel more like jewelry and fine bracelets, meant to be worn proudly and shown off to others. Too often, the prison of sin seems to have no walls, and the ceiling that separates the sinner from God is painted a pleasant sky blue.

In our civilized world and easy life, slavery still exists-but in forms so enjoyable that we tend not to mind. The rich man who puts trust in his wealth and lives to build his portfolio is enslaved to sin, even if the chains look like a Rolex watch, a Lexus sedan and a Gucci suit. The couple that lives together without marriage may cite economic reasons or their love for one another, but their infatuation that puts one another before God is in fact a cell. The feminist chant that women must be free to choose abortion is no freedom at all; it is a wicked Pharaoh who still puts children to death.

We mention only three examples, the enslaving chains of riches, human love and license dressed up as freedom. You see the problem, I hope: It is difficult to persuade anyone that riches, human love and freedom can be dangerous things. Society, in fact, trumpets these as virtues.

But we do not rely on society to tell us the truth; rather we rely on God's Word. To the one in love with wealth, the Lord declares the seventh, ninth and tenth commandments. To the couple in love, He admonishes with the sixth. To the one who chants "freedom to choose," He preaches the fifth. To all, He warns, "To be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace" (Ro. 8:6); and, "For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit to put to death the deeds of the body, you will live" (Jam. 1:13).

My point is this. Because of the ease and civilized nature of the world in which we live, we tend to disconnect from the brutal, life-and-death situation of the Israelites. But this is still a matter of life and death, and the devil delights that the slavery is so enjoyable that very few want to be set free.

One of the greatest challenges to the Christian is the everyday, always-present fight against the permissiveness of society, which says, "This sin and that sin are all right, and the Lord really doesn't care." Signs of His of judgment are all around; proof that He still hates sin is as evident as those ten plagues of old, yet we are tempted to go easy on sin and believe that it really doesn't matter. We're tempted to believe that slavery is just fine.

Into this world of sin the Lord sends His Word and Sacraments. By His Word, He warns of the dangerous enslavement of sin in His Law. For those who hear His Law and are cut to the heart about

their sin, He offers forgiveness in His Gospel. By His Word, and by Holy Baptism, He takes repentant slaves of sin and makes them into His holy people - His new Israel.

And for His people of Israel, He also offers a meal: Our Lord Jesus Christ, on the same night in which He was betrayed, took bread: and when He had given thanks, He brake it and gave it to His disciples, saying, "Take, eat, this is My body, which is given for you. This do in remembrance of Me. After the same manner also He took the cup when He had supped, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, saying, "Drink ye all of it; this cup is the New Testament in My blood, which is shed for you for the remission of sins. This do, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of Me."

He gives specific instructions, calling for His people to use bread, wine and His Word. He calls upon His people to examine themselves, lest they come to His table with unrepentant sin. He calls upon His people to believe in His bodily presence there, lest they come to His table with unrepentant false teaching. He declares that this is a supper for His people, and no foreigners are allowed. But along with these specific instructions, He gives a promise of deliverance: This is for the forgiveness of sins. This continues to strengthen your faith and keep you in the family. This dissolves the shackles of sin that the devil seeks to reattach, hoping to make you His prisoner once more. And because this is for the forgiveness of sins, it is a foretaste of the feast to come-the banquet feast of heaven.

The instructions are specific-but oh, the blessing!

However, in a world where slavery to sin seems so hip, the Lord's Supper seems so restrictive. Does it really have to be according to the Lord's instructions? Does it have to be bread and wine? Do we really have to examine ourselves and be repentant of all of our sin? Do we really need to believe that He's really present-body, blood and all-in, with and under that bread and wine? Shouldn't this meal be more about us being together, and less about the forgiveness of sins? And, for goodness' sake, does it have to be closed?

To all such questions, we paraphrase the Lord's Word from Exodus 12: As it was the Lord's Passover, so Holy Communion is the Lord's Supper. He is the Host, and He sets the rules. If we change Holy Communion from what He says, it means one of two things: Either it's still His Supper, but we're celebrating it in a way that displeases Him; or it's not His Supper anymore. And if it's not His Supper, then He isn't there; and if He isn't there, He isn't giving forgiveness there.

It would be silly for us-or a cook of my limited skill, anyway-to try to make a cake by ignoring the ingredients and the instructions of the recipe; in exercising my freedom to change things, I would end up with a baked boat anchor, but certainly not food. (It would also make little sense to serve up food to those allergic to it, in order to make them feel included.) It would be far worse to ignore the ingredients and instructions of our Lord for His Supper, for the forgiveness of sins is at stake.

Perhaps I go on too long with the warnings here. In some ways, the lengthy warning is necessary because the Lord's doctrine and practice is always under such attack. On the other hand, I wish to avoid another trap, which is this: In discussing Holy Communion, we tend to focus so much on the instructions which may trouble us that we fail to rejoice in the blessings.

The blessings are so great and so many! We were born as slaves to sin, unable to free ourselves, and deserving only death and hell. Yet the Lord has saved us, washed us clean in our Baptism, and now feeds and nurtures our faith by His gift of Holy Communion. The Lord is present in this Sacrament-

present for your good! Rejoice, and stand in awe. The Son of God, enthroned in heaven, condescended to become human flesh and go to the cross for you. Now, He still deigns to come to you in bread and wine, for the forgiveness of your sins. As truly as He was there-body, blood and all-washing the disciples' feet in the Gospel lesson (John 13:1-17, 34), He is just as much at the altar with you-to strengthen and preserve you in the one true faith unto life everlasting. To prepare you for the feast of heaven and eternal life.

As we prepare, then, for the Lord's Supper this night, we make two conclusions.

Slavery to sin is real. It is often attractive and enjoyable, but it is still devastating and damning in the end. We know this because the Lord says so, and He always speaks the truth.

But the Lord still delivers from the slavery of sin. He has made you His by water and the Word, and now He invites you to His holy Supper. He is the host, and He prescribes the meal. He is present for you in this meal; and because it is the Lord's Supper, you may be sure that you are set free from the slavery of sin - for you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen