

The First Month of the Year
Exodus 12:1-14
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Perhaps it is no coincidence that talk of my thirty-year high school class reunion sprang up on Facebook on Thursday – on precisely September 1. After all, September *is* actually the first month of the year, or at least it was for many of us for a very great number of years. No offense to January but during our school years, we counted our lives out more in grades than in calendar years. It meant more to us to have passed from elementary school to middle school than that history rolled over a year or a decade or even a millennium. Between new clothes and new school supplies and new fears brought on by new pimples, every September marked the beginning of a new adventure, or more misery, depending on your perspective at the time.

It is all arbitrary really, though. Time marches on no matter how we count it. Kings and emperors may have changed our calendars through the years but the earth still orbits the sun, and the moon still travels around the earth, on a pretty regular basis, almost like clockwork, you could say. We divide those orbits into years and months and weeks and days, but even if we didn't, life would still go on. There would still be crops to plant when it gets warm and crops to harvest when it gets cooler. We would still experience the increasing and decreasing amounts of light and dark, but we wouldn't know what to call them. It is true that God created

time and called such divisions of light and dark day and night, but probably only for our benefit. What is the point of dividing up eternity?

Everything you really need to know about tonight's passage from Exodus is contained in the first two verses. "The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you." It is from this moment on that you really begin counting time. All the stuff of the past is important, but this moment, this Passover, this exodus, this freedom is such a watershed event that it merits changing the calendar. They must have already had a different beginning point of the year since God tells them that this will now be the first. These were not people without a sense of time or history, even if every day in slavery was just like the last one, for the last four hundred and thirty years. But they were people who needed a new start to their history, and this is the way God gave it to them. And so they go from marking time according to Pharaoh's calendar to celebrating it on God's calendar. And that celebration begins with the Passover.

This is, of course, a terrible passage. It predicts the death of countless innocent lives all because of the stubbornness of Pharaoh and the power of God. The Israelites will gain their freedom, but at the expense of the firstborn 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," as we hear as the story continues. It may be hard for us to imagine our God as quite so vengeful, and

so murderous, but that is the story we have received, and we must make the best of it. It may not be satisfying enough to recall that God was doing this, after all, for the people of the promise, to gain their liberty, but that is the way the storytellers have captured it. And so although we may have some qualms about celebrating such a horrible thing as the Passover, it is to celebration we have been called, and to celebration we must go, for the Israelites never looked back, except when they were hungry, and we probably shouldn't either.

Whenever I read about annual celebrations, like the Passover feast to which the Israelites are called, I am reminded of the work of the Romanian historian of religion, Mircea Eliade, about whom I think I have shared in the past. Eliade has identified the value of this type of annual celebration, saying that its purpose, at least in the mind of what he calls "religious man," as opposed to "modern man," that the value to "religious man" is that in the course of the celebration the thing being celebrated in some senses reoccurs, or that those celebrating participate somehow in the original event of the past as well as the celebration of the present. In the case of the Passover, it would mean something like that, not only were the Israelites freed when God passed through the land, but that as the Passover is celebrated each year, those who celebrate it are freed again, and again, more than just symbolically. Likewise with birthdays, we celebrate not merely another year of life, but we really experience a rebirth, a renewing of the person. In the celebration of a new year we celebrate its re-creation by remembering its first creation, the

beginning of time really. We are reintegrated into creation as we participate in the world's re-creation. If all of that kind of stuff just makes you shrug and say, "Yeah, right," Eliade would simply dismiss you as "modern man," and consider you the poorer for not being open to the intrusion of the divine in the midst of the sacred. I think he would also say that you might just miss the point of God telling the Israelites not only to celebrate the Passover each year, but that they must consider the month in which it happened to be the first month of the year, in other words, as if it were the very creation itself, as it was back then it shall be now, as foundational for them as the very beginning of the world. In a sense, God is equating their freedom with life itself.

This is great stuff, right, about how celebrations work, and what they mean? Maybe it explains why birthdays and wedding anniversaries and Independence Days and Labor Days are a big thing? They take us back to the purest moment of those original events when it couldn't get any better for us, or so we thought. On the other hand, armed with this information, perhaps now you are rethinking going to your next high school reunion, because there is no way you want to go back to those days. A mixed blessing, these celebrations. The truth is that since our counting of time is pretty arbitrary anyway, we can establish celebrations for pretty much anything at any time. Perhaps that is why some consider their birthday to be not the day on which they were born, but born again, whether in Christ, or delivered from drugs or whatever epiphany they may have had.

But if all of this is the case, that in celebrating, we recreate the original event, let us look at that event to see what we really should be reaffirming every time we participate in it. First of all, we see in God's commandment that no one shall be left behind; if a family cannot afford a lamb, for being too small, implying that it is too poor, a neighbor must share. The essence of this freedom event is that it is experienced in community; the whole community participates, not just the appointed leaders. They are, even in the midst of the chaos around them, to offer their best gift of an unblemished animal. They are to leave nothing behind, to burn whatever is not eaten, so as not to be burdened by what is not essential for their escape. God has provided freedom, God will provide food and everything else. They are to eat being ready to leave on a moment's notice, loins girded, sandals on, staff in hand. Freedom is too precious to risk fixing your hair. All of these elements of that first story are to be lived still today, especially at the remembrance of the Passover, but also daily as people who have been freed.

The early church did not overlook the similarities between Jesus' death and the Passover sacrifice. The New Testament is full of allusions direct and indirect to Christ's role in a new Passover. The death may not be as sudden as in Egypt, but the blood of that lamb protects from death all those who have it smeared on the doorposts and the lintels of their lives. We must not, however, let the comparison end there but let that first story inform the new story. We are still called to share. We are still called to participate, one and all. We are still called to offer our best.

We are still called to travel light and let God provide. We are still called to be ready to journey at a moment's notice. All of that is elsewhere in the Gospel story, but it is also there way back in the beginning at that first Passover. God is nothing if not consistent.

As we prepare to participate in the Lord's Supper, a commemoration of the last supper of Jesus with his disciples, a meal we are told was the Passover feast when they would have remembered all of this, I invite you to reflect on the freedom God has granted you in Jesus Christ, and how God's grace has been made real in your life. I invite you to undertake an examination of your spiritual life and see if you are sharing with others, participating to the fullest, offering your best, traveling light, and ready to journey in a hurry. You see, all of this is once again recreated tonight in the Sacrament, and it is never too late to embrace freedom and all the joys and responsibilities that come with it. Before we begin singing our song before Communion, I'd like to ask Lisa to play while we do that examination, and remember our freedom. Amen.