

Exodus 12:1-14

“One People Under God”

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The Paraphrase Version of the Scripture Reading:

Introductory Piece: This fall, we are listening to the Bible stories from the book of Exodus about how God freed the Hebrew people from enslavement. Today the story tells us about the night before they left Egypt for freedom.

The Story:

Moses acted on his call from God. He went to the King of Egypt and introduced him to the God of Israel – the one, true God. Pharaoh, however, was not convinced of the power of God and would not let the Hebrew people go. Even after several devastating plagues, he stubbornly held them in slavery!

But the time for exodus had come. This was going to be their new beginning. God spoke instructions through Moses and his brother Aaron to the people about their last night in Egypt. Each family was to secure and slaughter a lamb for their supper, sharing it with their neighbors, so that nothing was wasted. They were ordered to all prepare the meat on the same day of the month and at the same time of day – just when the sun had gone down, but before it was night.

A disease was going to spread through the country on this same night, and God told the people to take some of the blood of this lamb and put it on their doors to show that they were God’s people. That way, the disease would pass over them and not enter their homes. God promised that no plague would destroy them.

Moses directed the people to cook the lambs exactly the same way – roasting them over their fires. The rest of the menu was unleavened bread and bitter herbs. They were to eat all of it – no leftovers. The other thing was that they were to eat it fast. Because they were going to leave Egypt quickly, they wore clothes and shoes for their trip, eating with a walking stick in hand.

Archeological studies have demonstrated that the “Hebrews” were originally a group of loosely-connected, nomadic tribes in the ancient Middle East.¹ At one time, this collection of peoples may have been one family of multiple generations as Genesis portrays them, but by the time of their enslavement in Egypt, they were not *one* people; they were just invisible, non-Egyptian laborers whose lives didn’t matter.

The Egyptian enemy worked hard to keep them feeling isolated and powerless. The American version of chattel slavery, for example, systematically broke down

¹Walter Brueggemann, “The Book of Exodus,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. 1* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 690. See also Norman Gottwald’s *The Tribes of Yahweh* (New York: Orbis, 1979).

families by selling off spouses and children! It prohibited them from practicing their African religions, thereby robbing them of their cultural identity. They were over-policed and violently punished in order to deprive them of security, unity, and the hope of escape. Today's modern context may be different in details, but I would say that even now black folks particularly are under siege.

The Hebrews had at least one thing in common: an enemy who was oppressing them! At first I thought that *this* would have brought them together as one people, but their hatred of Pharaoh wasn't enough to unite and lead them into freedom.

In *today's* troubled times, when divisions between us are accentuated and the truth is contested at every turn, we might also think that a common enemy could bring us together. So, going into an election, when both sides are so polarized, some will try to rally us around who or what we are *against* – to give us an enemy – either Donald Trump or the so-called 'radical left' – rather than to unite us around who and what we are *for*, that is, our highest, God-given values.

Years ago when we were living in France, we met Francoise Demeure, a Catholic sister, who had served in a mission among the Montagnards – “the mountain people” – in Vietnam. These folks lived off the land and were held of no account in their country. The war raged on around them, and their villages were caught in the crossfire. The Viet Cong would bomb their homes and chapel one night, and the Americans the next. This people learned how to listen for the troops on either side, to be ready to escape into the hills at a moment's notice, and to return to rebuild, again and again for as long as it lasted. It wasn't despising their enemies that forged them into a people; they already were. It was their common identity and their faith that got them through the war.

Isn't this what the story in Exodus is teaching us this morning?

Moses and Aaron don't emphasize, and they barely mention the Egyptian enemy to the Hebrews. They instructed the people exactly how to avoid the plague and how to eat their last meal before the exodus. Every last detail was attended to, and the people became *one*, like synchronized swimmers or a marching band, like a union on the picket line or a medical team in the surgery room. The Hebrews became *one*, doing the things that God, the great I Am, commanded them, trusting the Holy One for their future.

So they put the blood of the lamb on their door frames. They roasted the mutton, left the yeast out of the bread, gathered the bitter herbs – fast food, ancient style! They ate at the same time, standing up, dressed and ready to march out of bondage! Plus, they connected their salvation to the God of their ancestors, the Creator and Great Promise-Keeper, now their Redeemer.

Trusting God together, they became one people under God. Then, every year thereafter, they retold the story of Passover and re-enacted that risky night, doing all of it over again in unison.

You see, a family does not become a family by focusing on its enemies. Fear does not make us a nation. An alcoholic does not get sober by blaming someone else. The church doesn't become one in Christ by hating others! Though it is tempting to pour our energy into revenge, this will never release us from bondage and oppression. Yes, a people *united* will never be defeated, **and we become one people under God by doing what God truly wants and trusting God together.**