

Foundational Stories Series
“Remembrance: A Gift from God for Us”
Sermon on Exodus 12:1-14 (9/20 & 9/21/14)
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For the last two and a half months, a fair amount of my time has involved weddings. By the time I moved here in late June, I had four McCabe weddings already on my calendar between late August and mid-October. Then, once I arrived, three more weddings quickly got added – one in August, one in November, and one in early December. This has meant juggling pre-marital sessions *for* and information *about* seven couples.

Now, this may not sound like that many wedding couples over the course of what amounts to a four-month period of time, but, just for some perspective, I only had four weddings over the course of the three *years* I lived in Wahpeton. So, seven weddings in four *months* – and all the planning and prep work they entail – is a fairly significant shift for me!

Plus, my own sister got married a month ago, so I spent a solid *week* living and breathing wedding details. Ultimately, it is nearly all joy when it comes to weddings – couples in love committing their lives to each other are a blessing and I truly enjoy so much of the work surrounding weddings. It's all the details that are a bit of a struggle:

How many bridesmaids and groomsmen are there? Where should they stand during the ceremony? Do we switch music between the wedding party processional and the bridal processional? How do the bride and groom want to be introduced at the end of the ceremony? What happens if either the ring bearer or the flower girl has a melt-down right before they are supposed to walk down the aisle?

Who all should do toasts at the reception? What should be said as the bride and groom walk into the reception? Should the maid of honor and the best man do a cute, little dance as they are introduced on their way into the reception? Are the parents of the bride and groom happy about how the ceremony turned out? Is everyone having fun?

Of course, there are all the decisions in the months ahead of the Big Day, as well: finding ceremony and reception sites, choosing colors for the bridesmaid's dresses and groomsmen's ties, choosing your bridesmaids and groomsmen, deciding on flowers, do you want live music during the ceremony and can you find a band or a DJ for the reception?

And, since we just had a wedding in my immediate family, I've learned that perhaps the hardest part about the pre-wedding planning is creating and culling the guest list: who makes it onto the first, “big-umbrella-if-only-we-could-invite-them-all” list...and, then, who gets cut...and cut...and cut...until you have the final, *final* list?

Even though I have been the pastor officiating dozens of weddings over the last eleven years, I've not often been part of the "inner circle" of people who see how the bride and groom are *really* doing in the days and weeks leading up to the wedding.

Since I got to be part of that inner circle with my sister's wedding I started wondering just how many brides and grooms, at some point, say or *think*, "Why are we doing all of this?! Let's just elope and forget about all the details! We don't need to make such a big deal out of getting married! It's just *one day* out of our entire lives!!!"

Well. Sometimes it's important to make a big deal out of things just because. Or...more than "just because." But, we'll get there.

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For nearly three months now here at McCabe United Methodist Church, we've been in a sermon series that's centered around some of the very first stories in the Bible – the foundational stories of our faith and of God's people. Two weeks ago, we wandered into the second book of the Bible – the book of Exodus – after spending the first two months of the series in Genesis, the first book of the Bible.

As we experienced many of the stories of Genesis, and as we're now experiencing Exodus, we have been learning the story of how the Hebrew people – the Israelites – how they became God's "chosen" people.

If you've been around for many of the weeks of this series, it's entirely possible you're getting a bit sick of the way I keep reminding you of certain, key parts of Genesis, and now of Exodus. But, today of all days, looking back – at least a bit – on where we've been is *extremely* important before looking at today's story.

See, today is all about *remembrance*...it's all about having certain things firmly planted in your memory bank so you can recall it on cue down the road.

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Back in Genesis chapter twelve, God invited a man named Abraham to follow... Abraham said "yes" to God, and then God made a three-part promise to Abraham and his wife, Sarah. I tested your own memories on this maybe a month ago and I'm going to test them again. What were the three parts of that three-part promise? Just call them out...

[Land. Descendants. Blessing.]

Exactly. The first part of the promise was land – the land we call "Israel."

The second part of the three-part promise was that Abraham and Sarah would have many descendants...and the third part was blessing – that Abraham and his descendants would not only *be* blessed by God,

but that the world would be blessed *through* them. Land, descendants, and blessing. The foundational promise between God and the people of Israel.

Then, beyond Genesis chapter twelve, we met Abraham and Sarah's descendants: Isaac and his wife, Rebekah, their sons Esau and Jacob, along with Jacob's many wives and children...all the way through the generations to Moses, who has become the focal character of the story at this point.

It's important to keep in mind that, at the end of the book of Genesis, God's chosen people had all migrated down to Egypt because of a famine in their promised land of Canaan. Then, over the course of generations in Egypt, the Hebrew people became slaves to the Egyptians.

Over time, the Israelites had become so numerous that the Pharaoh – the king of Egypt – got nervous that the Israelites might take over the country. So, he made them all slaves...and the Pharaoh thought that might help cause their numbers to decrease. Well, it didn't. So he devised an even nastier plan to eliminate the Israelites. When making them slaves didn't cause their numbers to go down, he decreed that all Hebrew – Israelite – baby boys be killed at birth.

But the people did all they could to protect their babies. One family even hid their baby boy in a basket in the Nile River hoping against hope his life would somehow be spared.

Miraculously, that baby boy's life *was* spared. That baby boy was Moses and, in fact, the Pharaoh's own daughter found him in the river basket, had compassion for him, and raised him as her own son.

Years went by, and, when Moses was a grown man, he decided to look at the situation of his own people – the Hebrews, the Israelites. He saw that they were slaves, which was surely hard enough...but, then he witnessed an Egyptian man beating a Hebrew slave.

In his rage over the beating of one of his own people, Moses killed the Egyptian who had been beating the Hebrew, and Moses hid the body. The Pharaoh found out about this killing and tried to find Moses to hold him accountable. When Moses heard the Pharaoh was after him, he fled.

Moses ended up in the land of Midian where he met a priest named Jethro. Moses married one of Jethro's daughters – Zipporah – and they had a son named Gershom.

At the beginning of last week's story in Exodus chapter three, Moses experienced the call of a lifetime when God spoke to him from a burning bush. God had seen the suffering of the Israelite people, the people had cried out to God for help,

and God was going to do something about it. //

Remember that three-part promise God had made to Abraham back in Genesis chapter 12? Land...descendants...and blessing – that God's people would be blessed *and* that the world would be blessed *through* them. As you might imagine, it would be pretty hard for a people to bless the entire world if they remained in slavery generation after generation.

So God decided it was time to free the people and bring them home. But God needed Moses to help – because that is so often how God chooses to work in the world: through *us*. God said to Moses, “Go to the king. I am sending *you* to lead my people out of this country.” That was in Exodus chapter three.

For the next several chapters leading up to today's story in chapter 12, there was a sort of holy-war-tennis-match between Moses and the Pharaoh, with God serving as referee and the Israelites themselves playing the role of unruly fans sitting in the stands yelling at Moses as he returns every ball the Pharaoh lobs into his side of the court.

First, God told Moses to go to the leaders of the Israelites, telling them that God has heard their cries and will deliver them from slavery in Egypt and will lead them home to their Promised Land. Then, after that, Moses was to go to the Pharaoh to plead on the Israelites' behalf. In order to get the Pharaoh to release the Israelites from slavery, God would enable Moses to perform signs in order to prove God's strength to the Egyptian king and leaders.

When the signs didn't work as proof, and the Pharaoh didn't let the Israelites go – and, in fact, he made their work increasingly difficult – Moses got frustrated...and the Israelites themselves began to seriously question God's faithfulness and Moses' leadership.

Since the Pharaoh did not find proof in God's power when Moses performed the initial signs before him, God decided to get a bit more... dramatic. A bit more terrifying. So God sent ten plagues upon the Egyptians – and, ahead of each plague, Moses warned the Pharaoh what was coming next if he didn't release the Israelites from slavery. Each time, the Pharaoh refused to let them go.

Even though God turned the Nile river to blood...even though God sent swarms of frogs, gnats, and flies to cover Egypt...even though God caused scores of Egyptian livestock to die and then caused sores to break-out all over the Egyptians and their remaining livestock...even though God caused a massive hailstorm that destroyed the Egyptians' crops...even though God sent swarms of locusts over Egypt and even though God caused thick darkness to cover Egypt for three days.

Interestingly enough, the plague of darkness – the ninth plague – was the one that caused the Pharaoh to budge a little. He told the Israelites they could leave...but that they could not take with them their own livestock. Moses shot back that this wouldn't work because they needed their livestock – not only for their livelihood, but so they could fully worship God with the animal sacrifices they used at the time.

So the holy-war-of-a-tennis-match continued for one more, deadly round... into the tenth plague, which brings us to chapter 11 and to today's reading.

In chapter 11, Moses warned the Pharaoh about the tenth plague God would send if the Israelites were not fully freed from slavery – and it was to be the worst of the plagues by far. If the Pharaoh did not release the Israelites, God would kill the first-born son and the first-born male animal in every family.

This was, ultimately, the plague that allowed the Israelites to leave Egypt – and we'll learn more about their travels *out* of Egypt in the coming weeks. But it's so important to stop here on chapter 12...because, in fact, *everything* stops for chapter 12. In chapters four through 11, there is almost non-stop action between Moses, the Pharaoh, God, the Israelites, and, of course, the plagues. Then, in chapter twelve, God hit the pause button and instituted the Passover.

And what is perhaps most fascinating to me about this is that God tells them how they are going to remember something that hadn't even happened yet. The Passover was to be celebrated in honor of how God spared the Israelites from the tenth plague against Egypt...yet, when God told them about this celebration, the tenth plague was still *coming*.

As Exodus tells it, God offers these instructions for the *remembrance* of an event before the event actually occurred. Why in the world would God do that? And, as our liturgist read today's reading from Exodus 12, did you notice how incredibly particular the remembrance was to be? Did you notice all of the bizarre details?

Choose a lamb or a goat – but it must be a one-year-old male with nothing wrong with it and it has to be big enough to feed everyone in the family. If it's *too* big for your family, invite your neighbors over...there shouldn't be all that much left over because you'll burn the leftovers the next morning.

Also, you have to *roast* the animal. You can't eat it raw or boil it...and you have to roast the *whole* thing – no throwing out the parts you don't like before preparing it. When you eat the roasted animal, you're also going to eat bitter herbs and thin bread made with *absolutely no yeast*.

And, while you're eating, make sure you're dressed in your traveling clothes because you might need to leave at any moment.

Most importantly, brush some of the blood from your animal on the doorposts of your house. This will be a sign for God *not* to strike-down the first-born males in that household in the way God will strike-down the first-born males in the Egyptian households.

God closed out the Passover instructions in chapter 12 with this statement: “Remember this day and celebrate it each year as a festival in my honor.” And again, God told the Israelites about this remembrance before the actual event they are to remember even occurred.

See...that is how important this whole experience was to be. The Israelites had been crying out to God for so long to free them from their slavery that God didn't want them to ever forget it when they actually *were* set free.

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As I was studying this passage over the past week, I came across these words written by pastor and writer Karen Hudson:

“God doesn't need blood on the door to identify Hebrew households any more than God needs a wedding to recognize when two people's hearts are joined... We humans, on the other hand, are different. Making big deals out of important events helps us to remember why and how we started along the path we journey. In the case of the Passover ... [the] people will need this memory and the lesson it teaches, namely that at times when all possibilities seem exhausted and hope dashed they can trust in God.”¹

Why does God stop all of the action before the tenth plague – before the people are set free – in order to give extensive details about how the people are to remember what is *about* to occur? Why the big deal? Why bother over nit-picky detail after nit-picky detail? Because we humans *need* to make a big deal out of major life events...and not only because the events themselves are a big deal – but also so we can recall those events down the road when life gets tough and our faith weakens.

When life transitions, it *is* a big deal. Especially if, through that transition, God is bringing some sort of freedom.

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As people of Christian faith, we are trained to have this sense that God is working for good in the midst of every terrible situation in this world. And we're trained to have this sense because it's biblical: in story, after story, God ultimately brings good out of tragedy, sin, and chaos. In fact, in Romans 8 verse 28, St. Paul clearly states, “We know that in all things God works for good for those who love him...”

In all things God works for good.

¹ *The Abingdon Worship Annual 2005*. p. 304.

If I were to pick one statement from the Bible for people of faith to have tattooed onto their hearts it would be that verse...because it's true. But sometimes things that *are* true, don't *feel* true.

When life is throwing you curveball after curveball, pain upon pain, grief upon grief, sometimes it's hard to find the good God is working to bring in the midst of all that's bad...right?

That was certainly the case for the Israelites leading up to today's story. Their hard slavery had so overwhelmed them they'd stopped believing Moses when he said God would, in fact, free them.

Eventually, God *did* free them. But the road to freedom wasn't easy. And, even after they were freed, things weren't always easy. For that very reason, God wanted them to make a big deal over the Passover – God wanted them to make a big deal over the freedom with which they were going to be blessed.

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The story of the Passover is a tough story and there is a lot in it with which I struggle. But, where I ultimately land from out of this story is a point on which I hope you all can land, too – a point of remembering that our God is a God who is always working to bring us freedom and new life.

That is our good news today. And, friends, when God brings freedom and new life, it *is* a big deal worth celebrating in a big way.

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The God who brought the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt is the same God who is at work in our own lives and in our world. This God is a God of freedom and goodness. And this is the God we are here to worship today. Thanks be. Amen.