

Exodus 12:1 The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt:

2 This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you.

3 Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household.

4 If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it.

5 Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats.

6 You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight.

7 They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it.

8 They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.

9 Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs.

10 You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn.

11 This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the LORD.

12 For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD.

Matt 18

15 "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.

16 But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

17 If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

18 Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

19 Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.

20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Loving Creator shine as a light before me that you may be seen and not I.
Give me words that I may speak, give us ears that we may hear and through
your Holy Spirit help us understand.

Amen

Today, as we stand ready to begin our church year, we hear the story from
Exodus about the beginning of their year.

The Israelites were slaves.

The people had joined their voices and cried out to God to be rescued.

Today's passage is the directions that were given to the people of Israel
before they were led to freedom.

They were to prepare quickly. They were to make the bread without yeast.
Eat a lamb. They were to eat standing up. They were to mark their houses to
protect them from death.

This is a rather difficult passage for us in our modern antiseptic time. But
let's look at it from the perspective of a people who looked back at this event.

When this story was finally written down, some years had passed. What the
people knew was that they were slaves; they knew that the Egyptians were
unwilling to let them go. They knew they had prayed to God for deliverance,
They knew that Moses had commanded them to be ready, They knew that
they had been released from their slavery and found freedom. They knew
that when they came together their prayers were answered.

This moment, this night became for them the Passover, still celebrated by
Jews around the world as a remembrance of the night they were delivered
and saved.

The people cried out to be saved and, according to the scriptures, God
responded in dramatic ways. God led them to a new life.

We would like to say that all things are good in this world, that the earth is
just as it should be and everything is fine. We would like to say we are in a
world where everyone respects everyone else, but we know from our own
experience that that is not the case.

If things were like that, then earth would be like heaven.

If things were like that, we would not have a prayer that says “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” We do not pray these words for no reason at all.

We pray for God’s will to be done on earth for a very good reason: that is not how the world works.

What is revealed in the Book of Exodus is a God who listens to the prayers of the people.

God responds to the requests of the people.

In Jesus’ time, the Roman occupation left the people of Judea as little more than slaves. They were restricted in what they could do; they were taxed heavily and saw no benefit from the excessive taxation as Rome used the money collected for maintaining the far flung empire, and so that the privileged could live in palatial opulence.

The people asked God for deliverance. They wanted to have a better world, a world more like the way God would want it with peace and love. They wanted a solution that would take out the Romans just like the Egyptians had been taken out.

Jesus offered a whole different way to understand the love of God.

Love your enemies and pray for those who oppress you.

Do not repay evil for evil.

Offer forgiveness; turn the other cheek; go the extra mile.

Many of his own people turned on him because he was talking nonsense; the Romans could not be defeated by love and prayers, could they.

The funny thing is that as Christianity spread around the empire things began to change, and, less than 300 years after Jesus death, the empire embraced this new religious idea. The empire was never the same.

As the people came together in Jesus name, everything changed.

Slaves in the US sang songs, prayers of deliverance, many of them looking back to the time of Moses.

The hymn we just sang came from that tradition. The plaintive call, “Let my people go,” was a cry for justice in slave communities as they cried aloud for God to free them, to deliver them from their bonds.

They would also sing songs like “Steal Away to Jesus” as a kind of code to gather to worship and pray together. If in the fields they would sing this song, it might mean that there would be a gathering for a church service that night. They would gather in Jesus’ name to pray and worship.

They would gather in Jesus’ name to cry for the redemption that is promised in the New Testament, the new covenant that God made through Jesus.

There has, since the days of Moses, been a realization that we are not free here on earth. This does not just apply to formal slavery; we are, as I said last week, confronted with a choice between the world of the flesh and of the Spirit.

We are slaves of the flesh, as Paul says, led around by our desires.

The prophets warned of this, but still God’s people wandered from God’s ways. The Prophets warned about the results of going against God.

In Jesus’ time things were no different. The people were unable to respond to God’s call perfectly. Even after the crucifixion and resurrection, they did not follow perfectly.

The Apostle Paul identifies this as a human reality in his letter to the Romans: **For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.**

We are challenged. We want to find a state of perfection, a heaven. We want to see the will of God fulfilled, but we are here on earth. We are unable to be perfect. We, as a result of being human are prone to sin. Life here on earth is a long way from heaven.

We argue with people we care about; we get upset with other drivers, or with people who have too many items in their cart in the express line. We become jealous, we cling to things, and we find ourselves doing things we know we should not.

Left to our own devices we make things here on earth worse rather than better.

Dictators around the world are a great example. When one person becomes the focal point, when a nation is controlled in the name of one person things go down hill.

I have been distressed recently by the situation in Zimbabwe. Robert Mugabe came to power for the people. The people were to be most important. The nation was to join together in the name of justice and equality.

In the beginning, that was the case, but not for long. Mugabe began to take himself too seriously; he wanted to give his friends power and wealth; he wanted to rule like a king; he wanted the power for himself.

Today he rules in his own name and will not even allow free elections because he knows the people would pick someone else and he would lose power. He wants the country ruled in his name.

Ruled in Mugabe's name, Zimbabwe is in shambles.

There are countless examples of what happens when one individual takes over in their own name. Just as there are plenty of examples of what happens when we gather in God's name, in Jesus' name.

God knows that we are not perfect, God knows that we are pulled in all sorts of directions in this world; God knows that we need help. That is why God came to dwell among us in human form; that is why Jesus came to be with us.

The last verse of the reading from today's Gospel passage is very familiar.

Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.

Where two or three, not twenty or thirty, not two or three hundred, two or three, when two people come together in Jesus name, he is there.

There is enormous power here.

We know that where Jesus is anything is possible.

We know that when Jesus is among us all things change.

When Jesus is here among us we are one step closer to heaven.

I have seen this power at work. I have seen a transformation happen when just two people come together to pray, or engage in some work.

I have seen it in visiting with a person in hospital or in a nursing home. I have seen it working on church projects. I have seen it in ecumenical gatherings. I have seen when Jesus is present, and God's power is unleashed, anything can happen.

I once served on an ad hoc committee. We were charged with a rather difficult task, and we did not all agree on what we should do, but we asked for God to be with us and for guidance. We put our own desires aside and asked what Jesus wanted; we gathered in his name.

Some of our meetings went for as long as six hours. Any of you who have ever worked on a committee know what a six hour committee meeting might feel like, but that was not the case. We were energized and found the process to be a blessing.

It all has to do with a name. In whose name are we gathered?

Do we gather here in the name of the deacons, or the trustees, or the church council?

Do we gather here in the name of habitat for humanity, or Nomads, or Sunday school?

Do we gather here in the name of Bob, or Mary, or Tom, or Dick, or Harry?

According to our name –United church of Christ, according to our by-laws and church covenant, according to our congregational tradition, according to our baptism, according to all this we gather here in Jesus’ name.

We work and serve in his name, we seek to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with others, and we worship and pray together in his name.

Jesus says, “Seek first the kingdom of God and all good things will be added unto you.”

Jesus becomes our Passover, he is the one who can lead us to our promised land, he is the one who offers us new life and new possibilities.

What is possible when we gather in his name? When we gather in twos or threes, or even better when we come together here in worship. New life and freedom are open to us all, particularly when we come together around his table to receive a foretaste of heaven.

Let us now gather at the table.