

March 24, 2005
Maundy Thursday
Exodus 12:14-20, 24-27a
Pastor Ott

We See Jesus Freeing Us

What memories do you have of the 4th of July?—our country's Independence Day. What do you think of when you think about the 4th of July? I would think somewhere along the line, one of the things that pops into your head is fireworks, right? Getting ready to watch fireworks, waiting to watch fireworks and waiting to watch fireworks, trying to settle the children down as you wait to watch fireworks, and then enjoying the fireworks.

The festival I just read to you about, the Passover Festival, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, really was Independence Day for the Israelites—when they were taken out of the land of slavery in Egypt and granted their freedom. There are a lot of special rites and rituals that go along with the Passover, but none of them have to do with fireworks. They are rites and rituals that teach us something about what God wanted his people to know at that time and what he wants us to know today. As you look at the shadows that are in these ceremonial regulations, as we have been doing all through Lent, we see the same thing—in these rituals, in these rites, in these regulations, we see Jesus. What we see is Jesus freeing us—freeing us from the power of sin, and freeing us to share the good news.

Passover was the greatest of the Old Testament festivals and it's probably the one that we Christians today understand the best and probably know the most about. We know about the blood—the blood of the perfect lamb that was put on the door posts. But the signature element that we focus on in our text tonight isn't the lamb, it isn't the blood, it isn't the Angel of Death passing over them, it's one of the ways they were to remember that event. They were to remember that event by focusing upon yeast.

God tells them, *“On the first day remove the yeast from your houses, for whoever eats anything with yeast in it from the first day through the seventh must be cut off from Israel.”* God told them not to eat anything with yeast in it. But even beyond that, he told them to get everything that had yeast in it out of their house. Over the years, the Orthodox Jews that continue to observe this have developed a lot of different things they do. They start searching the house a week ahead of time, and twice in the 24 hours before the Passover comes, they nullify anything in their housing saying, “It doesn't belong to me anymore” before God, before the Passover comes in case they might have missed anything. And even in a sense, in some of the houses, with the family, they would make a game of looking for the things with yeast, searching the house for crumbs, pieces of bread. The parents would hide pieces of bread in different places and as a family look for it. Anything they found with bread they would burn up the night before the Passover came—a family celebration, which is what the Passover was to be all about.

God's Old Testament people probably didn't celebrate in that exact way, but they had to get rid of the yeast. As you think about that, you might ask yourself why. Why in the world did God make them focus so much upon yeast? It seems odd. It seems strange to our ears. There are two reasons. One was the reason to look back. When God delivered them from Egypt, he told them that night when the Angel of Death was coming, "you make the bread and don't make it with yeast in it because you don't have time for the bread to rise or the yeast to work through the dough—your deliverance is that close at hand." So it made them think back to all that God had done—the ten plagues and the Angel of Death passing over the homes and Pharaoh finally saying, "Take the people and go. I don't want you here anymore". It made them think about how God had delivered them in the past.

But it was also to be for God's people in the Old Testament something to look forward to the future. Think about how frustrating that would be to get rid of every last thing that has yeast in it in your home. Think of how long it would take just to move all the appliances to get behind it all and sweep up all those crumbs and all those various things. Then after you have done all that, one of the things that will probably become clear is that you are going to miss some.

You remember how often God in the New Testament speaks about yeast as sin? He speaks of false teaching as yeast—watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees because a little false teaching works through the whole batch. Or in 1st Corinthians Paul calls the sinner our heart's yeast and tells us to get rid of it now that the Passover lamb has been sacrificed.

Yeast was a picture for sin. You can't have sin and have this relationship with God. And no matter how hard you work at it, no matter how hard you try, you aren't going to get rid of it all completely and fully. No matter how many committees you serve on, no matter how faithfully you attend, no matter how many times you serve the Lord, you can't work off your sin. So you are taken right back to where they were at the first Passover—right back to where we have been every week during Lent at our special midweek Lenten services. You are back at the blood.

That Passover—it was blood—the blood of the lamb that was put on the door posts so the Angel of Death passed over their homes. So that as they heard the screams and cries of grief among the Egyptians as their firstborn died in their homes in front of their very eyes, they saw how they were protected. They saw how they were delivered from death by blood.

Jesus is our perfect lamb without blemish. He lived in our place, willingly came to this earth, and was perfect, because you and I cannot be perfect. Then Jesus continued on Maundy Thursday from the upper room to the garden and allowed himself—ALLOWED HIMSELF—to be taken by the mob. He wasn't surprised. He went willingly. And then he allowed himself to be nailed to the cross so that our sins would be taken away.

Jesus has done all of this. It's pictured there in the removal of yeast from the house, the removal of sin from our lives. You and I can't do it. But the blood of our perfect Passover lamb has done it for us. He sets us free from sin so that now you and I can

begin to serve God. We can begin to do the things that are pleasing to God. Sin has been not only removed from us, but it literally sets us free—it's our independence from the control of sin so that we live to serve God.

A professor at our seminary used to tell his students, "Men, don't just mourn over the people of your congregations that are not in the pews. Be sure to take the time to rejoice for those that are." It's a miracle each and every time one of us who were born sinful and separated from God comes into God's house to worship him with a heart that is right with God and pleasing to God. It's a miracle that God moves us to do this. This is how he has set us free. And because he has set us free, we want to do what is right before him. This is his lesson in the Feast of Unleavened Bread—in these shadows we see Jesus and Jesus frees us. He frees us from the power of sin.

A pastor and his wife went to a parent/teacher workshop for their little girl. She was in a public school. As they met with the teacher, the teacher marveled at their daughter and how her faith seemed to be such a part of her. She said it was a natural part of their daughter. It wasn't forced. She often talked about her faith in classes. It just kind of spilled out of her. It's what she was. It wasn't forced. It wasn't pushed. It wasn't unnatural. The teacher said it was just a part of who she was and she was amazed at that. But in reality, that's what the Gospel does for us.

In the Old Testament, God set up a system for his people that underlined for them again and again the depth of his love for them. That system had to do with the Passover that they would celebrate year after year after year. It would remind them of God's love and God's deliverance—that God changes people and that they are set free by the Messiah who would come so that they can share the message of who God is and his love and share that and spread that message to others.

That's built into the Passover more than really any other shadow of Christ in the Old Testament. He wanted it to be repeated. He commanded a telling to be a part of the Passover. Moses writes, "*When you enter the land the Lord will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony. When your children ask you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?' then tell them*". Tell them. God built in a ritualistic ceremonial telling of God's love and his deliverance for those who are his people. It became something that developed over the years.

Four questions would be asked of the head of the household. The head of the household would explain how God sent Moses to lead his people out of slavery and how Pharaoh said no and how God intervened in the affairs of men with mighty and powerful miracles, and how God spared their lives through the blood of a lamb and set them free.

Each and every year the story would be told over and over again. Just like each year we gather during Lent and hear of our Savior's suffering and death in our place over and over again. And in each of these retellings, there is never a hint of the people's merit—it's all God's love. God has done it all.

In recent years, many Christian churches have started celebrating a Christian Passover on Maundy Thursday. That's a fine thing to do because it focuses us on Christ, which is where we want to be focused as God's people. But really the retelling about Christ and the retelling of God's love doesn't wait for a Christian Passover celebration today. For you it probably began, for most of us I would imagine, it probably began in our homes as we were growing up. Someone told us about who God is and how our sin has separated us from God and how God sent Jesus who loves us and took away our sins. Then as you grew, you shared that with others. If God gave you the gift of children, you have shared that with them. But also, God wants us to tell it not just within our homes, but outside of our homes. To tell the friends, relatives, associates and neighbors that we know that are hurting, that are struggling with guilt and with worry and with uncertainty, that we've got the answer. That we've got a God who loves us so intensely that he left heaven to live in our place and die in our place. We have a God who loves us so much that he became one of us so that we might go to live with him forever. But we don't even have to wait that long to enjoy his blessings. We have a God who is with us now and with us in his love and his protection and his grace.

God has given us the privilege of telling that message. We know we should, but along about this time quite often we are probably thinking to ourselves that we don't do that a lot. "I'm not really that good at it." Maybe we start struggling with feelings of guilt. Maybe we have a sense of conscience and we shouldn't feel as much guilt as we do, but maybe at times we should. Maybe at times we have shrank away from living for God and telling others who desperately need to hear this message—the incredible story of God's love and deliverance in Christ.

The answer to that guilt is not to ignore it. The answer to that guilt is not to rationalize it away and find someone worse than us and say, "At least I didn't do that. God must still love me." No, the answer to that guilt is the same answer that you and I find for every last ounce of guilt that we ever carry—and that is the cross of Christ. Jesus was perfect in our place. Jesus died in our place. The Spirit lives in our hearts who assures us that we are forgiven. This is where our sins are taken away.

But on this night we come together and we find a place that renews us so that we want to tell, so that we desire to tell, and we are built up by God so that we go out and tell. And this place that we find this evening is the Sacrament of the altar. What the past Passover prefigured, we enjoy in its completion this evening. We come into this intimate contact with Jesus—his very body and blood. And he says to us and looks us in the eye, so to speak, and says, "This is my body for you. This is my blood for you." And he tells us that, as we properly receive the Sacrament, **OUR SINS ARE FORGIVEN**. That renews us and that strengthens our faith. That builds us up so that we want to go and tell, so that we want to bring others to meet Jesus, and we want to take Jesus to meet others. That's the privilege our God has given us. He sets us free so that we can tell the good news.

God has set us free. But our Christian Independence Day is too big to celebrate in one event. This whole week is a celebration of our independence where we go from Maundy Thursday to God's love in giving us this Sacrament hours before he would die, to his command to love one another and to show that love in the world—follow behind

him and see him betrayed and denied. See him on trial. See him beaten, whipped, pierced, speared, broken and dead. And then come back again and see his empty tomb. Our independence celebration is this week. And we are celebrating Jesus who has set us free.