

**"No Turning Back"**

**Thursday, March 24<sup>th</sup> Maundy Thursday**

**Exodus 12:1-14**

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When I was growing up, when it came to taking a vacation, there were three family traditions. The first was that we would always pile into the car before dawn to begin our drive to wherever we were headed, ever seeking to beat the traffic through NYC. The second was that we would always pack a large cooler full of food for lunch. The third tradition was that even though it was four or five in the morning, and many hours before anyone should be thinking about lunch, we would dive into that cooler the minute the car backed out of the driveway. It was a meal of excitement and celebration.

Obviously we eat meals to nourish us but there are often other important reasons for our meals. We gather to eat at power breakfasts to talk business. We gather to eat for lunch to catch up with friends. We gather to eat around the dinner table as a family. There are all sorts of meals for all sorts of purposes. Tonight we gather for a meal, Holy Communion, in memory of Jesus and his disciples gathered for a meal on that fateful night in the Upper Room, as they remembered the first Passover meal all those years before in Pharaoh's Egypt.

That first Passover meal was a hurried affair. The Jews were preparing to leave behind their enslavement, to make a run toward freedom. It is a harsh and terrifying story that speaks of God striking down the first born. It gives us graphic details such as the blood of the slain lambs being placed upon the doorposts of every Jewish home so God would know who to spare. That blood served another function as well. Egypt was a

land of many Gods, but several of them were fashioned in the image of sheep. The smearing of the lamb's blood upon their doors would have very likely be seen as a potent symbol of disrespect, an abomination, a cause for great retribution.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner believes that the plagues and the Passover meal were functioning to close the door behind the Hebrew slaves so they had no choice but to run toward freedom. As we remember, the Jews originally came to Egypt to escape famine. They left their home behind in a bid for survival. Joseph had wisely saved the nation of Egypt by storing up grain and thus he could welcome his family and save their lives. But when the famine ended they did not return home to the land of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Over the years in Egypt they prospered and got comfortable in a land that was not theirs. They ate many meals that made them forget what God had given them. And then over time they became enslaved in that land. They became defined not by being God's people but by being the slaves of Pharaoh.

On that Passover night the door that gave them access to their current lives as slaves was slammed shut behind them. There was no turning back. Plagues littered the land. The Egyptian Gods had been defiled, the first born had been slaughtered. The Passover meal was a propulsion into a new and daunting freedom. Ready or not they were a nation on the move, eat hurriedly for it is time to leave.

When Jesus and the disciples gathered to celebrate the Passover meal, whether all of them knew it or not, they were about to leave behind the world they knew. During their meal together, Jesus gives them their marching orders. He commands them to love one another. He promises that the Holy Spirit will

be present with them. He tells them "Where I am going, you cannot follow, but you will follow afterward." For not very much longer were they going to be the students and friends of an itinerant teacher. They were soon to be the mourners of an executed man. And then the disciples of the risen Son of God. I wonder how many of them would have chosen the journey that was forced upon them. As for myself I would have preferred to have stayed in that upper room all nice and cozy, sitting at the feet of this brilliant rabbi. But they were propelled beyond that. Staying put was not a choice they could consider.

So tonight we gather for a meal of our own. Soon we will be fed at this table. But to what purpose? What happens after this meal? Considering that this meal is a celebration of the Last Supper which was a celebration of the Passover I think it is clear. As both of those meals served to drive those who were fed out beyond what they knew, so too, do I believe that is for what this meal is. We are fed the body and blood of Christ because whether we know it or not, we are being prepared to take a journey.

Reading through the scriptures is like perusing a travelogue. Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and many others, are all propelled into travelling. Sometimes they are literally running for their lives. And it is in their leaving behind what they know and journeying into the unknown that they encounter God more fully than they ever had before. The very first thing God says to Abraham is lech lecha "just leave." Abraham is beckoned forward into the unknown and into relationship with the divine. Rabbi Alan Lew writes, "All this is because the Torah is trying to communicate to us that leave-taking itself is extremely significant. It is the prerequisite to any encounter with God." (Lew, p. 15)

Now, this is not to say that changing geography is a necessity. But what it does say is that we can be lulled to sleep spiritually by rote routine. When we challenge ourselves to move beyond habit in our relationship with the world and with God the possibility is created for us to encounter God in new and deeper ways than we ever have before.

Tonight a door is being shut on what we have known. Standing still is not an option. So how do we do this? How do we move forward? Here is what I could say. Explore a new spiritual practice. If you do not regularly read the bible each week. Pick it up and give it a try. If you do not pray every day, set some time aside and do it. If you do not attend the Sunday morning Adult Education or weekday Bible Studies, come and pay them a visit. If you have not volunteered to serve dinner with Jan Hus or the Friday Night Dinner program, come and seek the face of Christ in the midst of those in need. All of these are very reasonable things to consider. But in truth I have absolutely no idea what you should do next. I have a tough enough time thinking about what I should do next. But I am deeply and passionately sure, it is not merely more of the same.

Tonight we are brought face to face with the Son of God, on the cross. The divine dies. And in a scant several days we will celebrate God's world-transforming victory over death. Paradigms and assumptions are toppling over like dominoes. If this moment is not an astonishing call to be driven out beyond what we currently comprehend in search of the divine presence, nothing ever will be.

We simply cannot return to the lives we know. Being fed at this table we must journey forward, out beyond what we know, and who we are right now, to experience afresh our God.

God continually confounds and surprises us; with new life for ancient Sarah and young David defeating the warrior Goliath; with a king born in a manger and a fisherman given the keys to the kingdom of heaven. As the Angel Gabriel said to Mary, "for nothing is impossible with God." So let us follow. Let us follow the one who dies for us; the one who will rise in our midst; the one who beckons us forward. The old life has gone. Our new lives in Jesus Christ have just begun.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Kushner, Lawrence, *The River of Light*, Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, Vermont 2000.

Lew, Alan, *Be Still and Get Going*, Little, Brown and Company, New York, 2005.