

The Beginning of Time

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
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Exodus 12:1-14

After four hundred years of silence, the Lord spoke. He spoke to Moses. “Come,” the Lord said to Moses, “I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.” The time had come, at last, for the slavery of the children of Israel to end. But that end would not come easily. Pharaoh would resist at every turn – until finally the cost of resisting would become too great to bear.

And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, “For you this month is where months begin; for you this month is the first month of the year. Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month every man is to take a lamb for his father’s house, a lamb for each family. And if the family is too small for a lamb, then he and his nearest neighbor are to share one, dividing the lamb according to the number of people who will eat it. Your lamb is to be a year-old male without blemish. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats, and you are to keep it until the fourteenth day of this month. And all the members of the community of Israel are to slaughter it at twilight.

“They are to take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and on the lintel of the houses where they eat it. That same night they are to eat its roasted flesh with flatbread and bitter herbs. Do not eat any of it raw or cooked with water, but roasted – head, legs, entrails – over the fire. And you are not to leave any of it until morning. If anything is left until morning, you are to burn it. This is how you are to eat it: with your belt fastened, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. And you are to eat it in haste. It is a Passover offering to the LORD.

“I will cross through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast. And against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. But the blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are. I will see the blood, and I will pass over you. No plague will destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

“And this will be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD throughout your generations – a lasting ordinance.

Children’s Story

How many of you have a birthday? All of you! Hmm.

How many of you have ever had a birthday party? All of you! Hmm.

How many of you have had more than one birthday party? All of you! Hmm.

Well, how often do you have birthday parties? Every year?!

Why do you suppose you have so many birthday parties? I’ll tell you why. Every year your family has a birthday party for you. They do it to remember and to celebrate the day you came into the family.

The day you showed up was one of the most important days your family ever had. Something really wonderful started that day. You.

And your family want to make sure they never forget that.

Sermon

Unless you’re measuring over against eternity, four hundred years is a long time. For four hundred years, Israel was enslaved in Egypt. Their life was bitter with hard work. In backbreaking bondage, they made bricks and buildings. Their survival was threatened, not only by the attrition of wearying work, but

also by the unchecked power of a frightened pharaoh, who had no memory of Joseph and no interest in that particular history lesson.

Generation after generation, the slavery continued. No end was in sight. Emancipation wasn't visible, not even on the farthest horizon. There was no progress toward the long-promised future. The memory of those promises was fading away, and all hope with it. Except for the steady march of death, time seemed to have stopped. For four hundred years.

No matter how you slice it, four hundred years is a long time.

Of course, time is a relative thing. Everyone knows this. We don't need Einstein to tell us. Doesn't time speed up when you're on vacation? Especially a good vacation? And don't a few days seem like forever when you're waiting for test results? So how long do you suppose four hundred years of slavery seemed?

But those four hundred years of enslavement were about to be put into perspective. Not by the aeons of eternity, though. And not by that special divine calculus where a thousand years are like a day and a day is like a thousand years. No, those four hundred years were about to be put into perspective by the concentrated action of God.

For the children of Israel, time would not be measured relative to four hundred years in slavery. Instead time would forever be measured from the moment that slavery ended. God told Moses and Aaron, "For you this month is where months begin; for you this month is the first month of the year" (v. 2).

It's not at all uncommon for a people to measure time with reference to a pivotal or foundational event. In the United States, we didn't restart the calendar on July 4, 1776, but that is the pivotal moment for the American nation. It marks our real beginning and the foundation of something that was unprecedented, even if imperfect, in our world. *Novus ordo seclorum*, we proclaimed. "A new order of the ages." We didn't restart the calendar on July 4, 1776. But we celebrate that date every year. For us as a nation, everything started on that date. Something new came into existence on that date.

And so God instructed Moses and Aaron, "For you this month is where months begin; for you this month is the first month of the year." God leaves no room for doubt. Passover is Israel's real beginning as a nation. With Passover, God initiated something new, something unprecedented, in the world: a nation in whose midst God himself would dwell. A holy people, in a holy land, for a holy purpose.

Everything the old promises intended, everything the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was about, was given concrete expression with the Passover and the Exodus and the significant events that directly followed. No wonder, then, that time would be adjusted and every year begin with the Passover celebration.

And now years later, the church of Christ has its own ways of marking time. Take, for example, the counting of years. We call this year A.D. 2008. (The A.D. comes first, then the year. It's not 2008 A.D., but A.D. 2008.) A.D., *anno domini*: "in the year of the Lord." In other words, time began all over and we started counting with the coming of Christ the Lord into the world. Of course, this counting isn't quite accurate. The best guess is that it's off by four to six years. And so Jesus was born in 4 or 5 or 6 B.C.

And, of course, this way of counting years is not universal, not even in the church. It reflects the long-ago political and cultural influence of the church, an influence that has faded. And so today the marking of time by B.C. and A.D. is more and more being supplanted by C.E. (the common era) and B.C.E. (before the common era). Fading or not, in its origin the B.C./A.D. way of counting years reflects the church's deepest conviction: that concentrated action by God, above all his sending of Jesus Christ, changes everything.

That same conviction is evident in the seasons of the year, though I'm not referring to spring and summer and fall and winter. Rather I have in mind Advent, Nativity, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Ascension,

Pentecost, the Reign of Christ through the Spirit, and then Advent again. For the church the year does not begin on January 1 and end on December 31. And the church has no fiscal year or other such fictions. Rather the year begins and ends with Advent, when we remember the world languishing in darkness, waiting for Christ to appear, and when at the same time we lean forward into the future, the time when Christ will come again and make his kingdom complete.

Time as a whole (the counting of years) and all the seasons reflect our memory of and our continued yearning for the concentrated action of God in Jesus Christ. And this way of marking time is an anchor for us.

For too many years, the death toll in Afghanistan and Iraq has been mounting. Lately, one storm after another has torn across the Caribbean and the US mainland. And every day, ordinary people in our own city keep crying out for justice – yet they don't receive it. (The payday lending industry, to take one example, recently spent more than \$1,000,000 gathering signatures in order to stall and, it hopes, to derail one work of justice: the state legislature's capping of short-term loan rates and fees at 28% instead of the prevailing 390%!)

The toll from wars and storms and injustice could injure, even erase, our hope – if our hope lacked a firm mooring, if our hope drifted away from God's action in Jesus Christ in the past, in the present, and in the future. But we mark time by that action —

Here, let me help you for the coming months. This year Advent begins on November 30 – that's Thanksgiving weekend. In 2009, Lent begins on February 25 – that's Ash Wednesday. Holy Week will begin on April 5, Palm Sunday. Easter will be April 12. And Pentecost will be May 31. I'll put these dates in the bulletin to help you remember. And, if it's not too late, I hope you will keep these dates in mind when you make plans to be away. Wherever you are, these are days and seasons that you want to keep. And in some significant ways, it's important to keep them, as much as you can, here with this family.

We mark time by the action of God in Jesus Christ. Soon it will be Advent again. During that season our memory and our hope will be rekindled. Because, in the face of the steady beat of bad news, we always find our anchor in the Good News. The Good News we remember day by day, Sunday by Sunday, season by season, year by year. The Good News into which we were baptized. The Good News we will share next Sunday in bread and wine. Whatever the bad news, we find our anchor in the Good News.

Let me wrap things up this way: However long or short our time – whether four hundred years in slavery or two weeks on vacation, whether seven years in a nursing home or eighty-three years of healthy, happy life – however long or short our time, we cling to this. When God takes action to rescue his people – whether by a Passover and Exodus or by Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God – when God takes action to rescue his people, that is when time begins.