

Creating a Memory — Rev. Denise Stone

Texts: Exod. 12:1–27 and Matt. 26:26–29

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Today we begin our Sermon Series on Holy Communion. It is my intention each week to not only give you information about Communion, but to deepen your understanding and expand your personal and corporate experience of Communion.

We begin first by going back to the Old Testament. To truly appreciate Jesus' last supper with his disciples, it is necessary to see the background of that supper, Passover. We are going to see how Passover was instituted. Then we will move to the New Testament and see how Jesus altered Passover and how the observance of Passover relates to our celebration of Holy Communion.

The Old and New Testament passages for this morning are Exodus 12:1-27 and Matthew 26:26-29.

Exod. 12:1–27

12 The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: ²This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. ³Tell 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. ⁴If 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. ¹³ The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

¹⁴ This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance. ¹⁵ Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread; on the first day you shall remove leaven from your houses, for whoever eats leavened bread from the first day until the seventh day shall be cut off from Israel. ¹⁶ On the first day you shall hold a solemn assembly, and on the seventh day a solemn assembly; no work shall be done on those days; only what everyone must eat, that alone may be prepared by you. ¹⁷ You shall observe the festival of unleavened bread, for on this very day I brought your companies out of the land of Egypt: you shall observe this day throughout your generations as a perpetual ordinance. ¹⁸ In

the first month, from the evening of the fourteenth day until the evening of the twenty-first day, you shall eat unleavened bread. ¹⁹ For seven days no leaven shall be found in your houses; for whoever eats what is leavened shall be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether an alien or a native of the land. ²⁰ You shall eat nothing leavened; in all your settlements you shall eat unleavened bread.

²¹ Then Moses called all the elders of Israel and said to them, “Go, select lambs for your families, and slaughter the passover lamb. ²² Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and touch the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood in the basin. None of you shall go outside the door of your house until morning. ²³ For the LORD will pass through to strike down the Egyptians; when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the LORD will pass over that door and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you down. ²⁴ You shall observe this rite as a perpetual ordinance for you and your children. ²⁵ When you come to the land that the LORD will give you, as he has promised, you shall keep this observance. ²⁶ And when your children ask you, ‘What do you mean by this observance?’ ²⁷ you shall say, ‘It is the passover sacrifice to the LORD, for he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when he struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses.’” And the people bowed down and worshiped.

Matt. 26:26–29

²⁶ While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.” ²⁷ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you; ²⁸ for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the

forgiveness of sins. ²⁹ I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."ⁱ

The Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke all depict Jesus' last meal with his disciples as being the Passover meal, as described in the Exodus passage we just read.

Passover is an annual memorialization of the Israelites being freed from slavery in Egypt. Jewish families celebrate Passover every year and this has been and continues to be a way for them to remember the faithfulness of God to the Israelites.

Alphonetta Wines, Senior Pastor at Union Memorial United Methodist Church in Coolidge, Texas, reminds us that

The details of Passover left nothing to chance. Smear homes with blood of the sacrificed animal, roast and eat the meat, burn any leftover meat, be fully dressed and ready to go at twilight. No matter how much they longed for the familiarity of Egypt, there would be no going back. Even if they did go back, the ten plagues (*that preceded our text today*) would have destroyed the Egypt they once knew. Today's Passover celebrations

include spilling drops of wine to remember that freedom came at the cost of Egyptian life.ⁱⁱ

Passover is a reminder that God's promise of blessing to Abraham was complicated, given that its fulfillment would eventually include not only war to possess the already inhabited Promised Land, but also loss to Assyria and Babylon, exile, return, rebuilding the nation, and more.ⁱⁱⁱ

Additionally, we need to understand that

Passover is a means of grace. Exodus 12:11b-14 provides specific language for this understanding. It is "the Lord's passover" (12:11) because it centers on what *God* does. God will "pass over" those houses with blood-smeared entrances, delivering them from the "plague." While the basic images are God's salvation from bondage and shielding from death, also to be noted is the response of the community: they are to prepare for a journey (12:11). This saved community must be ready to go, must be prepared for a trek that will move through difficult terrain (12:11). The Jewish community has stressed these senses of Passover through the centuries: God brought **us** out of Egypt!^{iv}

The theme of salvation is the prominent image for Passover (see Exodus 15:2) rather than the theme of forgiveness.^v

All of this, the whole history of Israel and their relationship with God, their very salvation, is wrapped up in the annual remembrance of Passover. Passover, in many ways is how the Jewish people have maintained their identity as a people. It is through their remembering of the Passover event that they are united, even though they are spread out all over the world. Passover is the celebration of the collective memory of the Jewish people.

Passover is the *celebration of the collective memory* of the Jewish people.

So, what does this “collective memory,” the history and remembrance of Passover, have to do with **OUR** celebration of Holy Communion?

As I mentioned earlier, the Passover meal is the last meal recorded by Matthew, Mark, and Luke that Jesus had with his disciples.

Jesus had given instructions to a few of his disciples in how to prepare for their celebration of Passover. Then they gathered in the upper room to do what Jewish people had done for centuries.

The background of freedom from slavery, salvation and God’s grace and mercy all were present when Jesus sat down with his closest friends.

Additionally, Jesus knows that he will be giving his life in just a few hours from this meal. His journey to the cross is coming to a conclusion. This meal, this time with his disciples, is especially poignant.

Jesus does the unexpected during this meal. At some point during the meal, Jesus takes a piece of bread. He gives thanks to God, breaks it and shares it with the disciples. Jesus explains to them that the bread represents his body, which will be broken for them.

Then at the end of the meal, Jesus takes a cup of wine. He gives thanks to God and shares it with the disciples, explaining that the wine represents the blood that Jesus will shed for them.

Put yourself in the shoes of the disciples. They have celebrated Passover every year. THIS was different. They must have sat wondering what was up. Just as I doubt the first people to celebrate Passover in Egypt understood the importance of what they were doing, I doubt the disciples understood the significance to what Jesus was doing.

Passover created a memory for the Israelites. Jesus' use of the bread and the wine created a memory for the disciples, for us, for Christians in all times and places.

Both meals [the Jewish Passover and Christian Communion or Lord's Supper] commemorate unimaginable pain and suffering. Both signal the beginning of something new. They are turning

points in the lives of all who partake. For the original participants in these meals, life would never be the same.^{vi}

As Christians, we do not celebrate Passover. Passover, while it is the background of Jesus' meal with the disciples, it is not what we celebrate with Holy Communion.

In our celebration of Holy Communion, we are remembering Jesus and his call to observe a new meal.

Jesus takes a loaf of bread, gives thanks to God, breaks it, and shares it with the disciples, saying, "This is my body." Likewise, Jesus takes and shares the cup, saying that the wine is his blood of the covenant. Through these simple, universal actions—sharing common food and drink—Jesus makes a profound promise: that he will give his own body and blood for the salvation of the world, to deliver us from sin and death, and to nourish us for eternal life.^{vii}

That is what we remember. In this meal that we call Communion, we remember Jesus' life, death and resurrection. We remember it was done all for our sake.

The background of the Jewish Passover – freedom from slavery, salvation and God's grace and mercy – were all present when Jesus sat down with his closest friends. It is the ideas of freedom from sin, salvation and God's grace

and mercy that are all present when we gather here at the Lord's Table.

In a few moments we are going to share in the Celebration of Holy Communion. Today and for the next three Sundays, we will be celebrating Holy Communion. Holy Communion is a powerful event uniting all Christians across time and place.

I invite you to pay close attention to the words we say and the things we do. I invite you to participate in this meal as if it was your very first time to do so.

Jesus said to do this in remembrance of him.

Today we remember God's love in Jesus Christ. Today we celebrate God's love in Jesus Christ.

This is the open and inclusive table of God where everyone is invited to receive God's love for themselves, and to share God's love with one another. Let us approach this table of friendship and blessing, grateful for Christ's promise to live within, and among, all those who love others as themselves.^{viii}

ⁱ New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/maundy-thursday/commentary-on-exodus-121-4-5-10-11-14-12>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/maundy-thursday/commentary-on-exodus-121-4-5-10-11-14-9>.

vi <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/maundy-thursday/commentary-on-exodus-121-4-5-10-11-14-12>.

vii *The Sacrament of Communion*. Copyright © 2010 www.thepresbyterianleader.com. Permission given to the purchaser to copy this page for use in local church setting.

viii <http://southminsterunited.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Responsive-Communion-Liturg-LOVE-2016.pdf>.