

## Passover

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 16th Sunday after Pentecost, September 19, 1993. Scripture Lessons: Exodus 12:1-14; Hebrew 11:23-28; Matthew 26:17-19.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

Who is God? *God is The One who Passover Egypt Thousands of years ago to judge and save.*

In *Habits of the Heart*, the study of Americans in the eighties, there's an interview with a young woman named "Sheila". When asked about religion, Sheila says, "I consider myself religious, but I don't know when I've been to church. My religion is just my own little voice. I guess you could call my religion 'Sheilaism.'"

Sheila is like a lot of us. We're religious. I know very few people who aren't religious. America is, by far, the most religious country in the world. Think of all the people you know who say, "I consider myself religious, but I don't know when I've been to church. My religion is just my own little voice."

How different is the answer that the church in every age has given to the question, "Who is God?". God is the One who delivered Israel out of slavery in Egypt. God is the One who raised up Jesus from the dead. God is the One who sent the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. God is known, not so much in our individualistic, isolated experiences, but within the congregation of the faithful who hear and obey the Word of God.

We don't discover who God is by listening to our own voice. We don't discover who God is through meditation or private religious experiences. We don't discover who God is through sharing our feelings and ideas. The God we love, worship and confess is One who acts, not simply in the private sphere of personal inner

experiences, but in history.

We can't begin to know who God is apart from hearing the stories in the Old and New Testament that tell us about One who has acted in history to save the world. That's why, in our Christian Education and small groups, there must be a balance between sharing our own feelings and experiences and listening to the stories in the Bible. When our Bible Studies and fellowship groups lose contact with these stories we begin to drift into Sheilism. The God we Christians love and worship reveals himself in the stories of the Old and New Testaments.

Take, for instance, the Passover story. The Lord says, "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."

Pharaoh and the Egyptians had been through nine plagues. There were times when Pharaoh seemed willing to subdue his proud heart before the Lord, but as soon as he had relief from any plague, then he steeled his soul again in defiance of the living God. And so judgment was upon him and the night <sup>came</sup> ~~was at hand~~; and, it was a judgment against Egypt.

Try to imagine the horrors of that night. What happened to Egypt was one of the most terrible catastrophes of history. Throughout the breadth and length of Egypt, in one night, in every home, there was one person dead when the angel of death

beat his wings through the land and the tenth plague in its awful stroke fell upon Pharaoh and his kingdom.

In that night we see a picture of the world's last judgment. Egypt stands for the world, the people on this earth. The apostles and prophets teach us that the day of the Lord will come; "he shall come again to judge the living and the dead." *as it did that night in Egypt.*

How can we make this real? I think of all the stories in the Bible, the stories that tell us that God is a judge are the most difficult for modern people to believe. Perhaps it's because we've become so use to stories of corrupt judges in the newspapers. Judges that take bribes. Judges that show favoritism. Maybe it's because we have listened so much to stories that leave God out of the picture that it's difficult to imagine how God would judge the world?

And yet, don't we long for just judges? Isn't all the concern about Supreme Court judges a concern for fairness, for justice, and for a society where evil and injustice is punished, and goodness and righteousness rewarded? Is there not something in the hearts of even the most secular of us - a desire - that behind this universe is a just and fair judge?

And don't even the most secular minded of us fear judgment? Environmentalists try hard to convince us that, unless we change our attitudes toward the environment, judgment will fall upon the earth in the form of terrible plagues; famine as a result of deforestation, skin cancer in the way of the ozone depletion and the green house effect which will raise the temperature to life threatening degrees. When the Bible speaks of the last judgment it means more

than simply the natural results of the foolish way we have treated the earth and yet, I believe, it includes that. It involves God, as Judge, acting in history to achieve his good purpose of salvation for the world by putting down all that resists his kingdom of peace and justice. This is what happened long ago in Egypt. God acted to free an oppressed people who, in time, would bring forth the Messiah who would save the world.

But there's more than judgment in the Passover. There's also salvation. Every Israelite home was to take a one year old lamb without blemish. Kill that lamb. Splash some of the blood of the animal on the side posts and over the door. Roast that lamb. Eat that lamb during the night. And the Lord God said, "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."

All of this is a picture of what God does through his Son, the true Lamb of God. God comes to us in Jesus Christ as both Judge and Savior. His life judges our life. His death saves us. God, in Christ, takes upon himself that judgment that is due us. Through Jesus, the Lamb of God, the sins of the world are taken away.

During World War I there was a period when the Allied armies were retreating after the Battle of Mons. The shells from the German batteries were falling near them. A young British officer was told to get all his soldiers out of a town. The municipal building of the town was being used as a hospital. The sick and wounded were unable to retreat. One of the Red Cross nurses told the officer, "We have a

flag pole and rope but no Red Cross flag. Without that flag, the Germans will bomb the hospital.” The officer hurriedly took a sheet<sup>+</sup> and some bandages. He dipped the bandages in the blood which lay in pools on the floor. He pinned the blood soaked bandages in the shape of a cross on the sheet, and hoisted it up the flagpole. Shells were falling all around, but from the moment the flag was up the Germans never allowed a shell to be aimed at the makeshift hospital. The wounded and the dying found safety under the blood stained Red Cross flag just as those ancient Israelites found safety behind those blood sprinkled doors.

The lamb’s blood had to be sprinkled after it had been shed. There had to be an individual appropriation of the Lord’s provision. Each family, by faith, had to eat the lamb and sprinkle the blood. Each family had to make a decision as to whether they would obey the strange word of the Lord that came through Moses. I imagine that some of those people, long ago, felt foolish about sprinkling the blood of a lamb on their doorposts and lintels. “What a ridiculous thing to do”, they must have thought. Many may have sprinkled that blood on their doors filled with doubt. Perhaps some did it simply because their friends and neighbors were doing it. And yet they all experienced God’s salvation despite their doubts and their motivation. The Lord was willing to accept them wherever they were and whatever the maturity of their faith.

That’s still true today. Faith is not believing what you know ain’t true, as Mark Twain once said. Faith is responding to the Word of God with as much of our heart

mind and will that we're able to give. One Christian evangelist invites his listeners to trust in Christ with these words: As much as I know of me I now trust to as much as I know of Jesus Christ, my Lord and my Savior.

I think of Dan. About twenty years ago he came with his wife to a small group Bible study in the basement of the church I served in Reedsville, PA. He said, very frankly, that he was not a believer in Christ. He was an agnostic. He didn't know what he believed. He was there, he said, solely to make his wife happy. And yet, as I think back on what happened in the following weeks, I believe that Dan was exercising faith in Christ. Already he was responding in faith to the Word of God that summoned him to that Bible study. In the coming weeks, Dan trusted more and more of himself to the God who delivered Israel out of Egypt and raised up Jesus from the dead. It wasn't a sudden conversion. There were no religious experiences. And yet he was beginning a journey of faith and obedience which

eventually led to a public profession of faith in Christ. *and continued service to Christ within the church.*

Dear friends, the God who comes to us *as he did long ago in Egypt, as* ~~in Jesus Christ~~ is our Judge and our Savior. In Jesus Christ, the God of the universe has taken upon himself our judgment in order to save us to serve him. The Lord wants each one of us to know him. Trust this One whose story you have heard this morning in the reading and preaching of the Word of God. As much as I know of me I now trust to as much as I know of Jesus Christ, my Lord and my Savior. Amen.

Let us pray: Merciful God, creator of the peoples of the earth and lover of souls, have compassion on all who do not know you as you are revealed in your Son Jesus Christ. Let your gospel be received. Turn the hearts of those who doubt, and bring home to your fold those who have gone astray; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.