

TRADITION

Exodus 12:1-14; Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson

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

I recently overheard a college professor lament our nation's loss of tradition. "Forty years ago," she said, "when I was in high school I had a no nonsense literature teacher who exercised a benevolent dictatorship in her classroom. She was tough. She was not loved but she was respected. When we read the Iliad and the Odyssey she made Homer come alive." The professor was referring to one of the greatest poets of all time, the Greek poet, Homer. Homer's writings deeply influenced the ancient world. Most Greek playwrights based their tragedies and comedies on stories told in the Iliad and the Odyssey. The Roman poet Virgil reinterpreted the tradition in his epic poem the Aeneid. The stories Homer immortalized permeated and shaped the ideals of ancient culture. Illiterate peasants as well as the learned could recite from memory the stories of Helen, Aeneas, and Ulysses because the tradition was passed down by word of mouth. The college professor went on to say, "Today when I greet a freshman class and talk about Homer, the only Homer they know about is Homer Simpson." Then she said, "A nation that does not hand on what they have received disintegrates and becomes decadent."

What she said got me thinking about why we're here tonight. We gather tonight to reenact an tradition handed down from over 3000 years ago. Scholars don't know for sure when the Exodus took place but most place it around 1400 years before the birth of Jesus. We don't know if Passover was celebrated every year since then. There's evidence in the Old Testament that generations had forgotten the Passover tradition. Forgotten they'd been slaves. Forgotten who Moses was. Forgotten about the Passover Lamb. Forgotten about the Red Sea crossing. There's evidence that King David was unaware of Passover. There's no evidence that King Solomon or any of the kings that followed him celebrated Passover - until the reign of King Hezekiah who lived 250 years after Solomon. God's people had become biblically illiterate. And because they didn't know from where they'd come, they didn't know who they were or where they were going. They had forgotten their traditions and, as a result, their nation declined and fell into gross injustice, immorality, and decadence.

By now you may be thinking, here's a sermon on how we should never change in worship or theology. We should maintain old traditions that no longer have any relevance. But this is not a sermon on how we should sing only the old hymns or read only the King James Bible or never reform our worship. Every generation needs to make the ancient tradition their own through music and art and poetry and story and ritual. Tradition is the living faith of dead Christians, whereas traditionalism is the dead faith of living Christians. Let's get rid of traditionalism. But let's keep tradition. Tradition tells us who we are. Tradition tells us who God has destined us to be. As someone has said, "Those who forget history are condemned to repeat it."

Jesus observed the Passover tradition but he also changed it. He kept the tradition but he wasn't a traditionalist. He didn't discard the Passover tradition as an ancient, irrelevant tradition. He didn't throw it out. He reinterpreted it. He gave it new meaning and new life. He took the unleavened Passover bread and said, "This is my body for you." He poured the Red Passover Wine and handed it to his disciples saying, "This cup is my blood shed for you." He transformed the ancient tradition. He found new life and meaning in ancient tradition that has energized the church for nearly 2000 years.

Today it's fitting that we read about the Israelites as they prepared to leave their former lives of slavery in Egypt. During this weekend of power and grace, God calls us to prepare for our own exodus, for a greater freedom in our lives. By reading about the first Passover, we can learn about Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, whose sacrifice delivered us from sin and death. At the first Passover, the Israelites placed the blood of a slaughtered lamb over the door posts of their homes. When God saw the blood, he passed over their homes, protecting them from the plague of death. The Passover lamb was to be without blemish, just as Jesus, our Lamb, was without sin – a perfect and fully acceptable offering to the Father. Through the shedding of his blood, Jesus conquered sin and death and everything that could cause our separation from God.

When God looks upon the blood of Jesus, placed on the door posts of our minds and our hearts, death and sin pass over us. Through faith in the Lamb of God, we experience our own exodus from slavery

and are brought into his presence. Jesus' blood is the one sacrifice that is fully pleasing to God. Only His death protects us from the snares of the evil one; only his blood can deliver us from sin. Our own attempts at freedom, our own efforts to find favor with God, will always fall short.

Since the death and resurrection of Jesus not one day has passed without the Sacrament of Holy Communion being celebrated someplace in the world. We continue the tradition because by participating we remember who we are and what God has destined us to be. Just as God ransomed the Israelites from the land of Egypt, Jesus has ransomed us from sin and death. Just as Moses delivered the Israelites from the heavy hand of Pharaoh, Jesus freed us from slavery to the devil. Let us place before the Lord all those things that keep us bound to the ways of death, and ask him to show us his glory as we wait for him this weekend.

Amen