

Foundation of the Nation
Exodus 12:1-20

To the Egyptians, Moses' announcement had to have been terrifying: all their firstborn children would die. And because Moses had told the truth about the coming of all the previous plagues, they had no reason to doubt his words. So while they no reason for hope, but every reason to fear.

But today we see just how different Moses' announcement sounded to the people of Israel. After all, he brought them the same news – that in one night death would claim the firstborn of everyone in the land of Egypt. Yet for the Hebrews, the coming of this plague would be a cause for rejoicing and celebration, not only on that night, but for generations to come.

In fact, this plague would in a very real sense form the foundation of the nation of Israel, the very constitution of the people of God. For it is in verse 6 of this chapter that the term "congregation" or "assembly" is used for the people of Israel for the very first time. It is as if the Israelites did not become a cohesive community until they shared the experience of the Passover together.

And even though we usually think of the Law of God as first given to the people when they arrive at Mount Sinai in Exodus chapter 20, today's passage actually contains the first commandments that God gave to the people of Israel. The commandment to observe the Passover feast every year, and the commandment to abstain from eating anything with yeast in it for a week – these commandments came before all of God's other commandments, even those that prohibit murder and adultery and theft. They even came before the commandment to worship God alone.

Now, that just doesn't seem right. How could a ceremony involving the blood of some animals possibly take priority over the Ten Commandments? How could this business about unleavened bread form the foundation for the nation of Israel?

Well, all of this does make sense, if we think for a minute about what these ceremonies mean. Remember, God had announced the coming of a great plague. He said that everyone's firstborn child would die throughout all the land of Egypt. But God told His own people that they had a way of escaping the plague.

But their way out didn't have anything to do with following the Ten Commandments. No, they would somehow save themselves by trying to be good. Instead, all they had to do was to kill a lamb in a special way, and put its blood on the outside of their houses, so that anyone who came to the door could see it. If the blood could be seen outside the house, everyone inside would be safe.

What does all this mean? Well, it obviously reinforces the truth that the Israelites were powerless to turn the plague away from their doors. It was coming, whether they liked it or not. And the only thing that could save them was the blood of a lamb. That sacrifice, not their own good works, was the only reason that God would show them grace and mercy instead of judgment and wrath.

And the idea of the lamb being a substitute for the people becomes all the more clear when we look at the word which describes this lamb. The Hebrew word technically means "one of the flock" and verse 5 makes it clear that this sacrifice could in fact come from the sheep or the goats. The indication is thus that one of the flock had to die so that the rest of the flock might be saved.

But this idea is confirmed for us when we look at the first time this word is used in the Hebrew bible – the passage we read responsively this morning. In Genesis 22 God provides not a lamb, but a ram, one of the flock that had been caught in a thicket, so that Isaac might be saved. Just so, in Exodus God provides one of the flock so that every Hebrew household might be saved.

So, why does the commandment to observe the Passover precede the giving of the Ten Commandments? Why is the Passover the foundation of the nation? So that the people of God might find their identity not in their obedience to the Law, but in the grace of God. And that is still true today. For what makes all of us the people of God is not something that we do for God, but something that God does for us. From the days of Moses to today to the end of time, God's people have always been saved by God's grace.

And the Passover is one of the clearest foreshadowings of the ultimate expression of God's grace, Jesus Christ. For why did the Passover Lamb have to be unblemished – without any defect? Because Jesus Christ is the only person who has ever lived a perfectly sinless life. And notice that the lamb died in the place of the firstborn of Israel. That is only fitting, because Jesus Christ was God's firstborn, God's only Son.

And remember, each family didn't just put the blood of the Lamb on the doorposts of their houses. They also had to eat the lamb: all of it, on that one night, leaving nothing for the morning. Just so, if we would be saved by Christ, we must not only look like Christians, behave in the right way through our outward, public actions. No, Christ must

become as much a part of us as our food becomes part of us when we eat it. And just as we take Christ into ourselves, we must take all of Him. We must not accept Jesus only as our Savior, and then refuse to make Him our Lord. No, for Christ to save us, all that He is must become part of us, just as all that we are must be surrendered to Him.

No, it's no wonder that John the Baptist called Jesus "The Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world." For Jesus' shed blood does much more than keep our firstborn children from dying a premature death. No, if His blood is upon us and within us, none of us ever need to fear death. For Christ has promised all His people abundant life now, and eternal life in His presence forever.

These are the promises of God, and God's people have always responded to God's grace through faith, through trusting God and believing His promises. And make no mistake: taking part in the Passover ceremony would indeed have been quite a leap of faith.

For think about it. This ceremony required God's people to identify themselves quite publicly as followers of God. And they would have been doing this at precisely the time when the Egyptians were going to be experiencing a tremendous loss at the hands of that same God. As the Hebrews put the blood on the outside of their houses they would thus have been setting themselves up as easy targets for the enraged Egyptians to attack. Putting the blood on their houses thus required a great deal of faith in God's promises of protection as well as deliverance.

And even though Moses said God would make a distinction between the Israelites and the Egyptians during this plague, that hadn't always been the case. Sure, God had kept the plague of hail away from the land of Goshen, but the plague of locusts came to Goshen all the same. And yes, God had protected the Israelites' livestock from disease, but the people of God seem to have been subject to the plague of boils. The plagues on the Egyptians may have been intended to make Pharaoh let the people of Israel go, but they were still tough for the Israelites to live through.

And, come to think of it, why should the people of Israel believe that this plague would be the one that would finally result in their freedom? After all, there had been nine devastating plagues before this one, and they were still languishing in captivity.

So yes, it took a lot of faith for them to do what Moses said – to put the blood of the lamb on their houses. It took a lot of faith for them to make preparations for leaving at the same time. It was undoubtedly uncomfortable and unpleasant to put on their traveling clothes and eat hurriedly. And I doubt that unleavened bread and bitter herbs would top anyone's list of favorite foods. Doing all that in faith instead of giving in to the fear of the coming plague had to have been tough.

But you know, the same thing is still true today. Many times, it's still not easy to trust God. For can any of us deny that sometimes God's promises seem quite distant, and even far-fetched? Is it easy to trust God when prayers go unanswered, when we or our loved ones are experiencing pain, when we struggle with frustrations and weaknesses, with doubt and despair? We know in our heads that Jesus died to give us abundant life, but sometimes it's hard for that truth to penetrate our hearts.

No, it has never been easy for God's people to respond to His grace with faith. But that is what the people of God did in the days of Moses. And because they trusted God, and because they trusted God's prophet Moses, they did exactly what Moses and Aaron told them to do. In fact, verse 28 makes this explicit: "As the Lord had commanded Moses and Aaron, so did they."

And so we see the final reason why the Passover is the foundation of the nation. Obedience is not what saves the people of God – God's grace does that. Obedience is not how God's people gain access to God's grace – faith does that. But obedience to God's commands is a proper response to God's grace. In fact, obedience to God's commands is a necessary expression of faith.

And obedience is not a one-time thing. That's why God made it very clear that the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were to be repeated every year. The people were not just to look to the Passover lamb once, only at a time when they were in tremendous need. No, they were to remember year after year what God had done for them. In good times as well as in bad times, they were to continue in their obedience.

And that's just as true for us modern Christians as it was for the people in the days of Moses. In fact, Jesus made it quite clear that living a life of obedience to God is actually much more radical, much more far-reaching than the Old Testament people of God ever realized.

After all, they thought it was enough to keep yeast out of their houses for a week, but Jesus says we must put sin out of our lives, not having anything to do with it any day of the year. They thought it was enough to eat all of the Passover lamb, and make sure that none of it was left until the morning. But Jesus taught us that, since He is the Passover Lamb, we must take all of Christ – all His holiness and all His selflessness – into ourselves, and thus give ourselves completely to the service of others.

In short, Jesus taught us that the Law of God is really a Law of Love – unconditional, self-sacrificial love for God and for others. And we must follow this law, not just one week out of the year, but every day in every way.

Yes, for the people of God, the constitution of our community, the foundation of our nation is the same yesterday, today, and forever. For the good news is that God saves sinners by His grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. The good news is that Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us. So, shall we respond to His grace with the faith and the love and the obedience that He deserves? Shall we keep His feast of love?