Sunday, 9/6/20

**Exodus 12:1-14**

1The 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. 5Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. 6You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. 7They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. 8They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. 9Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. 10You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. 11This 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. 12For 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. 13The 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.

14This 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.

**Sermon**

This is one of those passages that makes readers of the Bible think of the Old Testament God as angry and vengeful. The Hebrew people came to Egypt four centuries prior to the events of Exodus when Joseph was the Pharaoh’s righthand man and food was being distributed. Now, the author tells us, there’s a Pharaoh who didn’t know Joseph, and the Hebrew people have been slaves for some time. This Pharaoh is so paranoid about the prospect of losing his slaves that he’s ordered the firstborn sons of all the Israelite women to be killed. Despite the bloodshed, God worked through human events to save Moses’s life. Now Moses is divinely appointed to be the one who leads the Hebrew people out of Egypt to the Promised Land. God and Pharaoh are locked in a battle of wills regarding whether or not this will be allowed. Several plagues into the battle, God has told Moses that he’s about the up the ante by killing all the firstborn sons in Egypt, and the Passover feast is about to be instituted so the Hebrews can be spared. The bloodshed continues.

It’s hard to wrap your mind around all this violence. God does seem angry and violent. Then again, people tend to think of God as being like us, and people can be violent. Looking at the way the world is and always has been, if you’re inclined to think of God as an old man in the sky, you’d probably imagine God as violent. This passage—written down probably hundreds of years after the events portrayed—reflects an evolving sense of what God is like. The Israelites remembered that God had promised that Abraham would have descendants, and that Abraham’s descendants would live in the Promised Land. They derived their identity from that sense of being the descendants that God promised to Abraham, and they saw the Pharaoh violently standing in the way of God’s promise. The Israelites had cried out to God for help, and God responds by saying, “on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord.”

God seems to act with violence in this story, but the author wants us to see God’s mercy towards the Israelites. Too often the world is violent, and violence leads to more violence. We’ve seen that in recent months when police shootings have led to occasionally angry protests, with political rhetoric stoking the flames to the point that there have been shootings. God is merciful and loving, as readers tend to see more easily in the New Testament, but because God loves us, there’s judgment against human violence. Human violence also has consequences. And so the author of Exodus shows us God preparing to pass through Egypt, striking down firstborns.

I lean more towards seeing suffering of any kind as the consequence of human sin rather than God punishing; it’s impossible to parse the issue out accurately. The focus on this passage is God’s protection of the Israelites. God is going to make a way to liberate them from Israel. He’s also going to protect them from the death that’s coming. This ceremony of putting a lamb’s blood might strike modern readers as morbid, but it’s a sign that the Pharaoh’s violence won’t be visited on the Israelites because of God’s mercy: “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.” God judges this world’s violence, but he chooses to show mercy to the Israelites: God makes himself known to the Israelites so that he can show them a better way to live, so that they can be spared from the worst consequences of violence and evil.

So the festival of the Passover is created as a way of helping the Israelites participate in God’s act of mercy. The Passover is also a reminder for future generations that God has shown, and continues to show, mercy. This passage describes a liturgy—a formalized act of worship--