

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Moving Toward Freedom

Exodus 12:1-13

In early April, one of the first religious traditions impacted by the spreading coronavirus was Passover. This time around, the story of how God freed his enslaved people from Egypt, especially the parts about Moses, Pharaoh, and the plagues, felt particularly poignant. Since folks who observe the Jewish faith couldn't gather in-person, they did what people in various other religious communities were doing. They took their Passover celebrations online. Virtual seder meals were common, as individuals assembled via Zoom to share in the ceremonial dinner and to remember how God had brought his people out of captivity.

Today's text from Exodus reads like a manual of right practice for the Passover meal. Each element is symbolic. Bitter herbs remind the people of their sorrow and suffering in Egyptian bondage. The bread made without yeast recalls the people's need for haste and readiness as they prepare to leave captivity. The meat cooked in the fire reminds the people of the fire of God's presence in the burning bush, and the fire that will lead them through the wilderness to a new land and a new life.

After giving detailed instructions about what to eat, the first main section of today's text closes with a reminder about how to eat it. For one thing, when the people eat of the lamb, they're to leave nothing over. What they don't consume, they need to burn. They don't need leftovers holding them back. They won't be returning. What matters most is what's ahead of them, not what's behind them. When it comes to the Passover meal, "This is how you are to eat it: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the Lord's Passover" (v. 11).

Eat it in haste. When it comes to hasty eating, we've become experts. We live in a fast-food culture. We've mastered the art of how to grab a bite and go. Take note of the fact that in Bryans Road, both McDonald's and Burger King now have dual-lane drive thrus. Though when you're sitting in line, there comes a point where traffic merges, and you have to decide who gets to go first, you or the car next to you. What if there's a mixup and they get my burger and I get their nuggets? Thankfully the person at the window usually confirms what you ordered before handing you your bag of food.

Eat it in haste. For us that means French fries in one hand and a cell phone in the other. But for the Israelites, it wasn't about how to rush through a busy day, checking as many things as possible off the to-do list, and squeezing in some nutrition whenever possible. For God's people, it was about traveling light and being prepared to set out on the way to a better place, a place of freedom, a destination guaranteed by a God whose saving power was greater than all of Pharaoh's might.

When God's people eat the Passover meal, everything about them should reflect their readiness to leave bondage behind. "With your cloak tucked into your belt." Most Jewish people wore long, loose clothing. When you needed to travel or work, you often put on a belt or girdle, so you could take the bottom of your long robe and tuck it in, giving yourself

more freedom of movement. In addition to having your cloak tucked in, you're to have "sandals on your feet." In other words, have your shoes on, ready to roll. And thirdly, have your "staff in your hand." That is, a walking stick, which you'll need on a long journey over treacherous terrain. One day this past week, I saw a woman taking a walk here in the Bryans Road area. She had dressed cool for hot weather, was wearing her mask, and had a golf club, a driver, in hand. Either she was headed to the first tee, or more likely was just prepared in case she had to fend off any dogs during her walk. She had her own version of a walking stick. So belt on, shoes on, walking stick in hand. This is the picture of a person who's ready to leave at a moment's notice.

What a contrast to our way of life and our style of dress during the coronavirus pandemic. In recent months, we've focused less on being ready to move, and more on staying put. We've learned more about how to settle in and secure ourselves within our homes. We've worked from home. We've gone to school from home. We've ordered dinner from home. We've exercised from home. We've worshiped from home. I recently spoke to a friend whose church still hasn't reopened for in-person Sunday morning worship. She said she has really gotten used to going to church in her pajamas, coffee in hand, joining other members of the congregation online.

COVID-19 has changed some of our fashion trends. Especially during the height of the lockdown, many folks didn't have to worry as much about dressing up for work or school. Day after day after day, you could live most of your life in sweatpants and t-shirts. Shoes might be nice, but not a necessity. You could just go from room to room in your socks. Our clothing choices were less about moving into action and more about how to be as comfortable as possible.

This is very different from the Passover mode of living that comes across in today's text. Everything about the meal, from the food to the fashion, has to do with being ready to go, ready to travel. In fact, across history some people have even taken the part about eating the meal in haste as an instruction to eat the whole meal standing up as if in a hurry.

God's people should be in a hurry to exit from bondage and enter into freedom. For the people of Israel, this wouldn't be a quick and easy relocation. Remember that after being brought out of Egypt, God's people wander in the wilderness for a long time before they eventually enter the land of promise. So moving toward and occupying the space called freedom doesn't mean deliverance from all risks and threats.

In his book *The Will to Live On*, Herman Wouk tells about a meeting he had with modern Israel's first president, David Ben-Gurion, and how Ben-Gurion urged Wouk to move to the newly planted nation of Israel. Eventually the visit came to a conclusion, and as Wouk and his wife were preparing to leave, Ben-Gurion said, "You must return here to live. This is the only place for Jews like you. Here you will be free." "Free?" replied Wouk. "Free? With enemy armies ringing you, with their leaders publicly threatening to wipe out 'the Zionist entity,' with your roads impassable after sundown—free?" "I did not say *safe*," retorted Ben-Gurion, "I said *free*."¹

As I said, freedom doesn't necessarily mean deliverance from all risks and resistance. As God's people in Christ, we're not in this journey of following Jesus because it makes life more easy, more comfortable, more safe. We're in this covenant with God and with one another because God, in his great mercy, has come to us in Christ and has rescued us from bondage to sin and death. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God has brought us out an old world and old life that's passing away, and has brought us into a new world

and a new life under his reign. And through faith in Christ you experience the freedom of being a child of God among the people of God, living in the freedom of God's sovereign love.

Day by day, you're given time and opportunity to move further into the freedom that you have in Christ. There will be temptations and attractive opportunities to just stay put where you are in your life, or better yet, to long for the past and a return to what seems like the safety and security of what used to be. Remember that there were many times when the Israelites wanted so badly to go back to Egypt, to a kind of security that was actually just slavery. But each Passover meal reminded them of God's call forward, and with it the need for them to be ready to go, always on the move. Belt on, shoes on, walking stick in hand.

F. B. Meyer has written, "It is a mistake to be always turning back to recover the past. The law for Christian living is not backward, but forward; not for experiences that lie behind, but for doing the will of God, which is always ahead and beckoning us to follow."² During this pandemic experience, when we've spent so much time and energy on staying put and staying safe—and rightly so—perhaps God has also been present and working to reestablish our identity as a people in motion. Not a people who are trying to get back to the past or sheltering safely in the present, but a people who are at the ready, prepared to travel, prepared to go further forward into new life in Christ.

We're always living our lives in between Christ's first coming and his second coming, between our exodus from sin and death and our arrival in the full freedom of God's kingdom. In that journey of faith, the disruption and uncertainty created by COVID-19 can actually be wilderness territory where you and I learn more about how to let go of things, places, patterns, attitudes, behaviors, and systems that enslave us and try to keep us from what God wills and intends for us. As an individual Christian, you can use this season of uncertainty to see where you've grown content with just staying put rather than striving forward. And as a community of Christians, a church, we can use this experience of disruption to reawaken our sense of being on a living journey of vigilance, adaptation, and innovation, going deeper into the freedom of Christ.

Today, that journey has brought us here to the Lord's table, where we have our own meal to remember our liberation, and to keep us at the ready for what's ahead in Christ.

¹ As summarized by Gordan McDonald, from Herman Wouk, *The Will to Live On* (Cliff Street Books, 2000) n.p.

² F. B. Meyer in *Our Daily Walk. Christianity Today*, Vol. 40, no. 1.