



Daily Meditations April 13-18, 2020

The Biblical readings are taken from the Daily Office in the Book of Common Prayer for Year 2 and written by the St. Stephen's Meditation Writing Team: Dave Boyd, Becky Denton, Pat Gillory, Traci Maxwell, Jay Nickel, Bob Reed, T.Cay Rowe, and Carroll Wilson.

Click on the scripture reading for each day to go directly to link.

COLLECT, EASTER 1

Almighty God, who through your only-begotten Son Jesus Christ overcame death and opened to us the gate of everlasting life: Grant that we, who celebrate with joy the day of the Lord's resurrection, may be raised from the death of sin by your life-giving Spirit; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

What Will You Do While You are Stuck?

Monday, April 13, 2020

Exodus 12:14-27

"You shall preserve this as a perpetual ordinance for yourselves and your descendants."

In these passages, the Lord instructs Moses and Aaron about how to celebrate Passover--what to eat and when and how. The meal requires an unblemished lamb and unleavened bread, among other things. This celebration is to continue for all of eternity he tells them, because it serves as a reminder of the time when the Israelites were spared by the Lord as he passed through Egypt killing the first-born of each household not marked by the blood of the lamb.

Maybe it's a stretch to think about this whole episode as a metaphor for our times as the coronavirus spreads across the world, sparing many but taking out more than a mere handful. So be it. We live under the thumb of a plague, and we are trying to figure out the rules it dictates and the response it requires. All of us are under strict orders to stay home, with certain exceptions. Meanwhile, we do have choices, many of them because of technology. For example, last evening my wife and I had dinner with my oldest daughter, her husband, and my two granddaughters in Pearland! Thanks to Zoom, we had a chatty, fun dinner and decided on the spot to make this a tradition. Every Monday evening we'll break bread together via Zoom. Like the rite dictated by the Lord, we've adapted to a strange life in the 21st century. And that's actually nothing new.

People are, if they allow themselves to be, quite resilient and creative. The author of the *Daily Stoic* posted this reminder: "Isaac Newton did some of his best research when Cambridge closed due to the plague. Shakespeare wrote *King Lear* while he hid out from the plague as well. Ian Fleming, the creator of James Bond, wrote *Chitty Bang Bang*, while he was laid up in the

hospital, expressly forbidden from working on something as tough as a novel. Malcolm X educated himself in prison and turned himself into the activist the world needed."

So we get it, you're stuck. That's not your fault. But what will you do while you're stuck? That's on you. I'm reminded of that old saw: When the going gets tough, the tough get going. As a people, we Americans now have the time and the opportunity to count our blessings even while we acknowledge the curse of the pandemic. I offer this prayer, found in the *Book of Common Prayer*, as a guide:

"O God, in the course of this busy life, give us times of refreshment and peace; and grant that we may so use our leisure to rebuild our bodies and renew our minds, that our spirits may be opened to the goodness of your creation; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen."

Zero-Sum and Non-Zero-Sum

Tuesday, April 14, 2020

Exodus 12:28-39

The Egyptians likewise urged the people on, to hasten their departure from the land; they thought that otherwise they would all die.

After the Lord killed all Egyptian first-born as a last-ditch effort to free the Israelites, the Pharaoh gave up and told the Israelites to leave and take whatever they wanted. Apparently a very slow learner, the Egyptian leader finally figured out that God was not on his side. Perhaps this whole story in Exodus is historically accurate, but it is most certainly prescient when it comes to revealing something about human nature. We are a stubborn and hard-headed people, even if we're not slow learners, and when faced with something like the coronavirus, we can, like Pharaoh, turn to alternatives dictated by primal fear rather than reason. Fear breeds hatred and hatred breeds violence, and we are starting to see bits and pieces of those attitudes as the coronavirus siege continues. Consider those who point at the Chinese who live among us. Consider those who say it's quite all right to sacrifice the senior citizens in America so that capitalism can thrive unfettered and uncontrolled. Steven Pressfield wrote recently about an attitude or point of view that seems ingrained in way too much folks as they consider the future after we've defeated the coronavirus. They see the world as zero-sum. Certainly many of our leaders do so. Here's what Pressfield wrote:

"The zero-sum view of life is that of limited resources. Not enough to go around. If you and I want our share (or even simply enough to survive), we must take it from somebody else. However much of the pie we grab, that's how much less remains for everyone else.

"In the non-zero-sum world, on the other hand, resources are infinite. The love a mother gives to her child (and that the child returns) grows greater, the more each loves. There is and can never be a shortage of love. Compassion is infinite. Integrity is infinite."

Pressfield includes examples of non-zero-sum people, some real, some not: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Jesus Christ, Mahatma Gandhi, Abraham Lincoln Princess Leia, Luke Skywalker, and Capt. Miller in "Saving Private Ryan." Desmond T. Doss of "Hacksaw Ridge" fits the mold, as well.

Embracing the New Covenant

Wednesday, April 15, 2020

Exodus 12:40-51

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "These are the regulations for the Passover. No foreigner may partake of it."

Doesn't this resonate over the generations? Particularly in times of uncertainty like we face today, wouldn't it be satisfying to play that zero-sum game commanded by God in this set of Passover rituals? For some it seems to be. But, I'm like most Christians in rejecting the more than 700 rules and requirements listed in the Old Testament to instead embrace the new rules set out by Jesus Christ in the New Covenant. What would Jesus do? It's not hard to find out. When asked to name the greatest commandment, Jesus replied to his enemies: "Love God and love your neighbors as you love yourself." Never before in my lifetime have we had the opportunity we have right now to love our neighbors. I've been impressed by the immediate construction of a Wimberley Facebook page devoted to finding help for others and linking people with needs to people who can fulfill those needs. Nextdoor Wimberley and Nextdoor Woodcreek have likewise connected people even as we sit in isolation. The other night I got a phone call from Sharon East, who on behalf of St. Stephen's, was just calling to see if my wife and I were OK and needed anything. We were fine. But, what a gift! Another passage from the *Book of Common Prayer* seems applicable:

"Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving Spirit may so move every human heart [and especially the hearts of the people of this land], that barriers which divide us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease; that our divisions being healed, we may live in justice and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

Does Leaven Symbolize the Undesirable?

Thursday, April 16, 2020

Exodus 13:3-10

"Nothing made with leaven must be eaten."

Almost every verse in the Old Testament readings this day refer to leavening and the Lord's command that it must be avoided at all cost. Commentaries on these verses aren't particularly illuminating, and it's hard to understand this obsession with leavening. Even Jewish religious writers trying to explain the mandate leave me scratching my head. For example, consider this commentary by Jewish scholar William Propp, who points out the removal of leaven has a deeper meaning:

"Yeast is in theory immortal. The Israelite chronometric system, however, and their entire worldview presuppose that time is not a continuous stream. It is and must be periodically interrupted...[e.g. the Sabbath, Sabbatical Year, and the Jubilee] The laws of unleavened bread ensure that the bread by which people live does not transcend time, at least within the Holy Land. Once a year, all yeast must be killed, with a week of separation before the souring of a new batch...Leaven symbolizes the undesirable: misfortune, evil intentions, and especially ritual impurity. To purge it is to make a fresh start, to experience catharsis. This understanding fits well with the historical context of the holiday. In the month of the New Grain, the Hebrews cast off centuries of oppression and assumed a holier, more ascetic status for their desert wanderings and subsequent national life. (Anchor Bible Commentary to Exodus 1-18, p. 434)"

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul also refers to leavening, saying that sin is like yeast. It swells and spreads evil. I'm sorry, but I just don't get it. I understand that practicing Jews might read Exodus and switch to unleavened bread during Passover, but its metaphorical value falls flat to my modern mind. Perhaps I'm too dismissive. There is value, after all, in the reception of rituals and rites, even if that value is simply to acknowledge the deeds of our ancestors, keeping the faith as a kind of anchor during turbulent times.

The First Born's Responsibility

Friday, April 17, 2020

Exodus 13:1-2, 11-16

"Every first-born son you must redeem."

Here, the Lord commands that the first-born male of every kind of animal, including humans, belongs to him. To the modern ear, this sounds as if the oldest son has the most value, and as the first-born male of my family, I would love to claim that is the case! What is the value, then, of my brother? For 100s and 100s of years, whether based on these words in Exodus or something else, the first-born males have been given special treatment in the passing on of estates, for example, or the sacrifice of other family members so that the first-born might thrive. Thankfully, we Americans seemed to have largely evolved away from this notion, and, thanks to the women's movements, among other things, have embraced every member of the family as important and valuable to the whole. But, this stress on the first-born seems to me also to point to the conclusion that the first-born male has a peculiar mandate to be a good role model for those who come after him. If you're a first-born son, you recognize that the family and society at large seem to pressure you to be an achiever, excellent at something--and protective. You have a responsibility to be honorable, noble, and upright and true. Those are attributes society values. Seeking to achieve those goals can have pitfalls, of course, but the best oldest brothers take their roles seriously. At least I do.

Beware of History Written by Winners

Saturday, April 18, 2020

Exodus 13:17-14:4

"You shall camp in front of Baal-zephon just opposite by the sea."

The story of the Israelites fleeing Egypt continues under the direction of the Lord. He tells them where to go, where not to go, and where to camp. Then the Lord says something that seems to be remarkable in its cynicism. He says he will make Pharaoh pursue the Israelites after they have left Egypt. "Then," he says, "I will receive glory through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord." My goodness. Really? Of course, I think this is an attempt by the author(s) of Exodus to explain Pharaoh's motivation after he told the Israelites to leave. It's written way after the fact, and it is written by those who ultimately won.

Beware of history written by winners. I'm wondering, for example, how this pandemic that's sweeping the world will be depicted by the historian of tomorrow. If they have made it to the other side of this sizeable event, they will, by definition, be winners. Some, no doubt, will characterize the coronavirus as the breath of evil spread across the lands by political party or another. Still others will strive to be scientific and rational, data-driven and reasonable. I have no idea how this will play out, and can't predict who the winners will be. If we are at our best, those writers will look back and say we stayed together as a community, we took care of those less fortunate, we were, in short, Christians. I think we all know what that means.

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