

The Power of Ritual

Exodus 12: 1-13; 13:1-8

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12 The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, 2 “This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. 3 Tell 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. 4 If 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. 5 Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. 6 You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. 7 They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. 8 They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. 9 Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. 10 You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn with fire. 11 This 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. 12 I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, from human to animal, and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. 13 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.

13 The Lord said to Moses, 2 “Consecrate to me all the firstborn; whatever is the first to open the womb among the Israelites, of human beings and animals, is mine.”

3 Moses said to the people, “Remember this day on which you came out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, because the Lord brought you out from there by strength of hand; no leavened bread shall be eaten. 4 Today, in the month of Abib, you are going out. 5 When the Lord brings you into the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, which he swore to your ancestors to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey, you shall keep this observance in this month. 6 Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a festival to the Lord. 7 Unleavened bread shall be eaten for seven days; no leavened bread shall be seen in your possession, and no leaven shall be seen among you in all your territory. 8 You shall tell your child on that day, ‘It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.’

How many of you have been to a Passover Seder? I have been invited a few times by Jewish friends. It’s my favorite religious ritual of all. No offense to the stuff we do here, but the Seder is the best. All over the world Jews celebrate Passover, but not in the synagogue. Passover is celebrated in the home.

It’s a real meal—but it’s a ritual meal. Much of the food is symbolic. There’s storytelling woven throughout the evening. What do you eat at a Seder?

- There’s parsley or a green vegetable that signifies the flourishing of the Israelites in Egypt—remember Joseph? But the parsley is dipped in salt water to remember the tears people shed when they became enslaved by the Egyptians
- There’s haroset, a mix of nuts, fruit, and honey; it’s name is like the word for ‘clay’ and it remembers that the Israelites made bricks and mortar for the Egyptians.

- There's bitter herbs, often horseradish, that recalls the bitterness of slavery under the Egyptians
- There's a roasted lamb shank that recalls the lamb sacrificed on the eve of the Passover.
- There's the roasted egg, which symbolizes the sacrifices people brought to God in the Temple to give thanks for God's goodness.
- There's matzoh—also called “the bread of affliction—which the Israelites made in Egypt, hurriedly, because there was no time to let the bread rise.
- There's wine—four cups if you're keeping track.

Because the Seder is celebrated in homes, it's quirky. There aren't professional religious people around. All of the words—all of the holy, fancy, “important” words—are spoken by regular people. It's very child-centered. The youngest child asks the four questions, which begin “why is this night not like every other night?”

There are thousands of versions of the Seder liturgy, the Haggadah. The ones that I've participated in have often invited reflection on modern political and economic liberation—the belief among Jews is that Exodus is not a one time event, but a continuing process. There are feminist and ecological haggadahs. Some seder plates now have an orange to welcome the presence of LGBTQ Jews. Many seders remember the suffering of the holocaust. And because every Haggadah ends with the hope that we will celebrate “next year, in Jerusalem,” many reflect on the contested reality that is the modern state of Israel.

Whatever version is practiced, the Passover Seder comes back to these basic truths:

- We, at this table, are God's people
- Our God freed our ancestors from slavery; our God is a liberating God
- We must remember that liberation and we must tell our children about it.

This text from Exodus is so interesting. God's in the middle of freeing God's people from the pharaoh—there have been miraculous births and burning bushes, and plagues and there are about to be pillars of cloud and fire and walls of water. Right there comes a set of instructions. Moses says, “listen, friends... generations from now, you must keep repeating this meal.” Why? Because Moses knows that someday, long into the future, all of it will be a distant memory. And when it becomes a distant memory, then God's people will be in real danger... danger of forgetting what God did and in danger of forgetting who they are. When you eat the meal and tell the story, you will remember.

Ritual is so powerful. It's one of the world's great languages. It transcends culture. Human beings, over hundreds of thousands of years, have made rituals to make meaning together. We become ourselves in rituals. Rituals convey identity, through action and story.

Rituals have a bad reputation these days. What do you associate with rituals?
What secular rituals are important to Americans?

- Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, College Football Saturday
- Christmas – sort of a religious ritual, but is driven by ritual consumer activity

I wonder which modern rituals ennoble us. Or if our modern rituals make us better versions of ourselves. One of the problems with rituals is that they often belong to powerful institutions. Church. Government. Military. Institutions that love to project power; they love to act like they never make mistakes. Their rituals are authoritarian.

But what if rituals belonged not to some hierarchical, unaccountable institution, but to us? What if we were entrusted to be ritual creators? What if stories were our stories to tell? What if we felt freedom to adapt traditional rituals to the present moment so they connect with what's going on in our world? What if we could tell old stories to connect us to tradition, but what if tradition didn't require subservience, but allowed us to interpret what that tradition means for our own lives?

You see where I'm going. It's what happens at a Seder. It's also what we try to do with worship at NDPC. Worship isn't meant to be made of stone. It's more like Legos. It should be flexible, adaptive, dynamic.

That's why we try things. Easter in the cemetery. Good Friday pilgrimages through Decatur and a tactile child-friendly stations of the cross. It's why we have art and poetry and it's why our kids do Worship & Wonder. It's why we have puppets and plays. It's why we ask you to speak as you respond to the meditation or scripture.

It's not about novelty. It's about finding new forms so that the stories of God and our ancestors can be filtered through our bodies and our experiences and give us new life.

The rituals of modern life are demoralizing. We're still trapped by the myths and rituals of American supremacy and by the consumer rituals of late-stage capitalism. Without good rituals, we are lost; we have no idea who we are.

Here, we must be dedicated to the practice of ritual and the telling of stories that remind us who our ancestors were, tell us who we are, and let us ask who God is calling us to be.

- Here, we remember Jesus, who cared for people who were hurt, helped people who were lost, and fed people who were hungry at his table. He died in nonviolent resistance to state oppression. And God raised him from the dead.
- Here, we remember the Spirit, who broke down boundaries, and brings people together across differences, forming us into a communion of faith and love.
- Here, we remember God, who made a world where there is enough for every living creature to thrive, who told us to "tend it and keep it." Our God so wants people to be free, that God brought us out of slavery, and still leads people to freedom today.

Our rituals put these stories into our bodies. These are our stories—but you know whose stories they really are? They are our children's. And who will tell them?