

The reading for today takes place between the ninth and tenth plagues that God sends on Egypt to get Pharaoh to let the Hebrew people go. I think that's important, because it tells us that they're living in an especially anxious time, sort of a rolling emergency. Those plagues—the locusts, the dense darkness, the swarms of flies, and so forth—the Israelites had suffered under them, too. And there was no way to know how long this pattern would go on, with Pharaoh relenting after a plague, saying he'd let them go, then reneging on his promise only to have another, more horrible plague ravage the land. Nerves had to be ragged, and those who were prone to depression were already hunkered down, ready to give up.

In the midst of this rolling emergency, God has the bright idea to institute a ritual. "Moses and Aaron," God says, "This time we're in now, this month, I want you to make it the first month of every year. It'll be like a birthday, the birthday of the people of God." And God proceeds to outline quite a detailed ritual, with the menu and the manner of preparing the food and the timetable. There'll be a lamb for each household, but if a lamb is too much food for a single household, they'll share with someone else so there are no leftovers. The lamb's blood has to be smeared on the doorpost. Everybody has to celebrate this dinner in a hurried way: "your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand." And then I'm going to send a really bad plague on Egypt, but the blood on the doorpost will let my angel know not to touch that household.

Pause for a moment. The Israelites have no idea that they're about to be liberated. God hasn't told them, and past experience is of one false alarm after another. They're stressed out and exhausted, and now God wants them to have a ritual meal in which part of the ritual is to be in a hurry. That sounds like a terrible ritual.

Now, what we know is that they really are going to be liberated this time, although with Pharaoh's army at their heels and a big wet sea to cross. We know that they're going to live in the wilderness for a while, and depend on God for their daily bread, unable to store up extras for just in case. We can see this as a foretaste of what's ahead of them. But they don't.

So what if [Bibleworm podcast] an Israelite family had just declined to play along? Would God have smote that family, or would God have passed over them and spared the first-born males in that household? Rabbi Amy Robertson, who loves impossible questions, posits that God would have extended mercy and passed over them, *but* thinks that that family might then have been unprepared to walk out of Egypt with the rest of the community. She thinks that the ritual of a hurried supper—like eating with your running shoes on and your car keys in your hand—is a way to practice getting the hell out of Egypt. Just up and going is too big a step for these traumatized people, so the ritual is a way to practice going.

I think that is fascinating. The people don't know it, but God is preparing them for the next big thing by instituting a ritual that, by enacting it, will increase their capacity to participate in that next big thing. No leftovers, just quickbread, car keys in hand. The first Passover dinner actually prepares the people to enact the event that every Passover after that will commemorate.

In the second part of our reading, God assumes that the people are going to follow through, and that the plan will work. Now God gives instructions for how they'll need to celebrate Passover the second time, the third time, and forever afterward. And what's critical about all the times after the first is that you replicate those hurried conditions and you tell your children, "It is because of what the Lord did for *me* when *I* came out of Egypt." See, that's

interesting too. Because these people who get out of Egypt, they're never going to get to the Promised Land personally. The wanderings in the wilderness outlast them all, and it's the second generation that enters the Promised Land. So it's the second and third and fourth to infinity generations that are going to tell their children, "It is because of what the Lord did for *me* when I came out of Egypt." People who were never in Egypt are going to enact the ritual that says they remember Egypt and God got them out.

In the midst of a rolling emergency, God institutes a ritual for people to take their first step out, *even though they don't yet see the way out*. And God tells them to keep practicing, and to own that story as their own. God's people are supposed to always be preparing for an unknown future in which they'll need to travel light and depend on God for that night's resting place and the morning's sustenance. The world is changing too fast and on too great a scale for us to get our arms around; even though the change will be liberating, there is no way to be ready for all of it. We have to practice acting fast and walking on the way that'll open up before us just in time.

Let's be clear: I'm not in favor of rolling emergencies. I'm living for the peaceable kingdom, when everybody has a vine and fig tree to sit under, and your heart doesn't go into your throat when the phone rings. But it is strangely reassuring to read this story as God's acknowledgement that emergency is too often a way of life, and therefore God's going to help us practice coping, moving forward, and even thriving.

Our ritual is communion, on the first Sunday of every month which is *kind of* like the first month of the year. We don't hurry (and Jews don't hurry at Passover either, but they do eat matzoh). But we remember as if we'd been there that nobody knew what was about to

happen, nobody had a lot of control over Pharaoh—I mean, Pilate--, and in the last hours before all hell broke loose, Jesus gave them something to practice, something that would take them through. He gave them bread, and said, life in this world breaks us, as this bread breaks, as I'm going to break. Nobody gets through life unscathed. So accept this bread, broken so that you may live.

And he gave them a cup of wine and said, Breaking is not the end. Breaking will not destroy me or you, because beyond the lethal backlash against your whole-hearted life, God has plans for us and for every generation, for our injuries to be mended, for our losses to be restored, for deliverance into a life we cannot now imagine. Drink this, if you took the bread, because they belong together. Beyond what wants to destroy us there is God, delivering us.

So let's practice. Let's take the broken bread and the cup of promise, so that we'll be a little more prepared to get hit by inevitable adversity—so that we'll expect it, but also know that even tragedy is not the boss of us, or of God. Let's practice the ritual that Jesus gave us, rooted in the ritual of deliverance from slavery in Egypt, and repeated around the world today under every circumstance imaginable, but all within the ambit of God's redeeming power. We don't know what's coming tomorrow, and it probably *won't* be a magic vaccine or instant debt relief for the poor, but with practice we can meet it courageously, generously, hopefully.

I see what you did there, God. All those years ago.

You put forth all the plagues: the bloods and the bugs and the frogs.

And when all of that was said and done. When Moses' leadership alone wasn't enough to set the Hebrews free—you required some participation.

You said, with arms outstretched, that if you want salvation, I'm going to need a little work and sacrifice from you people.

Lord teach us to be safe and free, teach us how to love and serve one another. Help us to be full of hope as we participate in our own Passover today.

<https://katyandtheword.com/2020/09/28/passover-prayer/>

So may the blessing of the God who calls the people out of Egypt call us out from our comfort and our safety to embrace a journey of challenge and risk

May the blessing of the Son who kneels and washes our feet call us out from our comfort and our safety to embrace and serve those we meet on the journey

May the blessing of the Spirit who weaves dreams of a new community call us out from our comfort and our safety to provide welcome and hospitality to strangers as well as friends