

I don't think we've ever read this part of Exodus in church before. We've read the story of the Exodus itself, of course, and the angel of death and the people eating hastily and fleeing, and the Pharaoh's soldiers chasing after them and drowning when Moses lets the waters fall back after the people have passed over. But this is a moment in which the action has stopped, in which God tells Moses in excruciating detail how to perform the ritual of remembrance of the event. On the tenth day of the first month you have to take this particular kind of lamb and you have to cook it this way; here's how you have to dress, and here's what you have to say to your children. Normally in church we kind of skip over the instructions for rituals, and trust me, there are a lot of long, detailed instructions in the first five books of the Bible.

Today, though, it's the giving of the instructions that we're invited to think about. Moses is told to have the people re-enact the crucial events of the escape from Egypt *so that* they and their children and their children's children will remember "It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt." They must not forget; they must make that collective memory their own in every age.

The Passover is a celebration of God's liberating will for the people, but it is also a celebration of terrible violence against the Egyptians. This is just one of many disturbing texts that condone violence against others because they are not members of the covenant community. The Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Hivites and the Jebusites come in for their share of violence at the hands of God's warriors. But Egypt really has a special place in Israel's self-talk; Egypt is the Other with a

capital O which symbolizes every kind of sin and evil until the Babylonians and later the Romans come along.

Safwat Marzouk, a professor at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, suggests that this Othering of Egypt is powerfully shaped by Israel's own identity struggles. As the kingdom of Israel grows and becomes more complex, in a way it can see itself in Egypt, and sees in Egypt the possibility of its own assimilation to other cultures and loss of identity. To put distance between itself and a nation that seems disturbingly familiar, Israel turns Egypt into a monster, so alien that it is acceptable to contemplate the murder of the first-born Egyptian little boys on the night of Israel's escape, so demonic that it is justified for the Pharaoh's troops to drown in the Red Sea. We should not forget that it was Israel's King Solomon who enslaved his own subjects in order to build his palace and the first Temple. At that moment Israel looked an awful lot like Egypt, and probably didn't like it. It was more comfortable to ignore such traits in themselves, and condemn them in others.

So Passover is instituted in order to remember forever that God is a liberating God . . . but it also has this dark side of "Othering" Egypt. Through the centuries, it's also been the case that Jews almost literally did have to celebrate the Passover surreptitiously, ready to flee at a moment's notice, because of Christian persecution. Christians are also capable of projecting their own dark sides onto others, and imagining ourselves to be a breed apart.

A few weeks ago, I heard a white supremacist who claims Christianity being interviewed on the radio, to get his worldview. He said that people naturally prefer to be around similar people, and that we should live in enclaves of race—separate

but equal—without the government forcing us to interact. There's a lot to argue with in his worldview, but what's very clear is that he is deeply uncomfortable with people he perceives to be different from himself. He is not stimulated, he is not curious, he is perhaps vaguely threatened or even afraid. Those feelings are natural, though they're nothing to be proud of—but they're understandable. Nevertheless, given the human tendency to project our own wickedness onto others and deny it in ourselves, it seems to me that when we find ourselves threatened or afraid we should walk *toward* the other, not away. And this has also been modeled by the people who celebrate the Passover.

I think that every religion contains the seeds of self-correction: while it is vital to preserve the memory of God's liberating actions, reflective people do not want to reinforce otherness. It is not uncommon nowadays for Jews to invite non-Jewish friends to celebrate the Passover with them. The seder, which remembers that hasty meal and the subsequent escape in the night, is now often shared with those who have historically played the part of the Egyptians. Not always, not every seder, but frequently, despite still-tender feelings about the history of Christian hostility toward Jews.

And the communion celebration does the same thing. John Holbert, a retired homiletics professor, remembers that a church his wife served celebrated communion every week. They were Methodist, so that wasn't customary, but the members had come from many different countries around the world, and her predecessor had discerned that the ritual of communion was one involving far more than words and could thus be a uniting event across many languages and cultures.

“Drinking and eating and sharing together,” he writes, “regularly bind that community with bands of devotion and love, forged in the fires of Jesus' offering for all.”

At the heart of the Passover celebration is unity: everyone belongs to the community liberated by God. These directions for the ritual make sure that everybody is included: “If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one.” All have enough; none has too much. And in the Christian appropriation of this ritual, the same obtains. Jesus is remembered as having made plenty out of not enough. The first Christians shared their food so that those who were poor had something to eat. The communion table is open to all who come. Everybody has been enslaved at some time; everybody should remember and celebrate God's liberating actions.

World Communion Sunday is a day on which to remember our unity across lines of nation, race and history. It's a Christian celebration, not Jewish or Hindu or Sikh. I grew up being exhorted to marvel at the great unity of the world's people within Christianity. But I would say now that the part where we project our own identity struggles onto some demonic “other” and justify violence against them is not crucial to the celebration. Today, World Communion Sunday is an opportunity to live out that inclusivity that makes sure everybody has part of a lamb, or everybody has some bread. Today we know that we are all children of God, and God is at work to liberate us all.

Let us pray: Lord God of grace and liberty,

On the night of the Passover the sacrificed lamb became a sign of freedom and you

freed the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. Likewise Jesus sacrificed himself so that we could see that we have nothing to fear from the powers that seek to enslave human beings. Help us live into this new life, teaching us to serve you in faithfulness as you have served us. We offer our gratitude in the name of the one who turned slavery into new life, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.