

"The Demands of God's Presence with Us"
Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary Year A
September 7, 2008
Text: Exodus 12:1-14
Dr. David T. Howeth

When we think about the first Passover, we tend to focus our attention on what *God's presence does for* the Israelites in captivity in Egypt, that is, the Lord "passes over" all the Hebrews' houses, as marked by the sign of blood, and "passes judgment" on all the Egyptians' houses in the form of slaying the firstborn child in each of those houses. It is what God does in this act that ultimately leads to the Hebrews' being liberated from the oppression of Egypt.

But if we study the entire Passover story carefully, we must see that there is a lot more concern expressed about what *God's presence demands of* the Israelites. I believe we need to understand clearly, just as God wanted the ancient Hebrews to, that the presence of God does plenty for us, but it also demands a great deal of us in response. So let's walk through this story again, examining what demands of us there may be as a part of an authentic understanding of Passover.

I think we can see first of all that **God's presence with us demands the ordering of our lives.** "The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the Land of Egypt: This month shall mark for you the

beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you." The Passover was to be celebrated at the beginning of the year. God's great liberating act was to mark how the year begins. First things were to be put first. Daily life, as represented by the calendar, was to be ordered around the saving work of God. That is the first demand of God's presence with his people.

It is to be the same for us. God's presence in our lives demands that we put our lives in order. We set priorities. We establish a hierarchy of values. *And our priorities and values are to reflect the nature and character of God.*

We are helped in our efforts to order our lives by our tradition of worshiping on the first day of the week and our receiving communion on the first Sunday of the month. But we also are helped in our efforts by the vows we take as a congregation in response to each and every member joining our church: "With God's help we will *so order our lives* after the example of Christ that, surrounded by steadfast love, you may be established in the faith, and confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to life eternal." The presence of God in our midst demands such an ordering of our lives.

And God's presence with us demands the maintenance of community through solidarity and sharing. "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. 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." The presence of God at the first Passover demanded that the people participate in the ritual meal all together, as one, in solidarity as a people. And that meant no one was to be left out. No family was too small not to be included. There was to be a sharing of the lambs so that all could partake equally and fully.

This is the essence of genuine community, both then and now. The presence of God calls us into solidarity with one another and to radical sharing out of that sense of oneness. *In the church, no one is to be left out; all are to be included.* We are to share with anyone and everyone who has need. When one in our midst hurts in any way, all of us suffer, and when one in our midst has reason to rejoice, all of us celebrate. God's presence with us demands this kind of community.

God's presence with us also demands the refusal to be wasteful. "They shall eat the lamb that same night; . . . you shall let none of it remain until the morning; . . ." God's presence with us is accompanied by many gifts. We are blessed richly by having the Spirit of God in our midst, and responsible stewardship of those gifts begins with our unwillingness to be wasteful of them. Responsible stewardship of the gifts of God begins with our understanding of the idea of

adequacy, of enough, of sufficiency. This is so hard to practice in our culture of over-abundance, where waste is a way of life.

We also need to understand how much we live in a world in which there are "haves" and "have nots." We have so much, while most others of our brothers and sisters in the world have so little by comparison. Yet if we take seriously the idea that we are all children of God, the demand of God's presence not only requires solidarity and sharing among ourselves, with those who are just like us, but with the whole world as well, including those radically different from us. *And such sharing is made a lot easier and less painful if and when we quit being so wasteful of that with which we have been blessed.*

Not only does the Lord's presence with us demand that we order our lives, that we maintain community through solidarity and sharing, and that we refuse to be wasteful, **God's presence with us demands the willingness to participate with God in a pilgrimage of faith.** "This is how you shall eat [the meal]: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly." This is a wonderful image: the first fast-food meal. This was not to be a leisurely dining experience. No brandy and cigars afterwards. Just eat and be on your way.

This is the picture of people embarking on a journey, and that is the essence of faith. It is a journey, a pilgrimage, a never-ending

quest. Faith is never at rest, fixed, stationary; it always is moving, growing, expanding, developing, maturing, deepening. Faith never has all the answers. That is why God leads the people out of Egypt and on the adventure known as the exodus. That is why Jesus' basic invitation to those of us who call ourselves disciples is to "Follow me."

One of the wisest things my hometown preacher used to say from time to time was, "It is never appropriate or adequate to say that you *are* saved. That implies that your journey of faith is over, is completed, that you've reached some spiritual destination. It always is more accurate to say that you *are being* saved. That honestly reflects the fact that you're not entirely there yet, but you are on the right path." Perhaps that is why John Wesley spoke of "going on to perfection." *God's presence with us demands that we go on a pilgrimage of faith with God leading the way and guiding our steps.*

If we take this passage from Exodus seriously, I think we have to say additionally that **God's presence with us demands the leaving of judgment to God alone.** "It is the passover of the Lord. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord." Notice, if you will, that as a part of the first Passover there is no invitation for *God's people* to kill the firstborn in the land of Egypt. It is *God* who

will do it. There is no act of retribution taken by God's people against their enemies, and there certainly is no preemptive strike. There is judgment to be sure, but it is left to God and God alone.

There are good reasons for letting God be responsible for judgment. For one thing, God can do it so much better than we can. Think about it. If the Israelites had sought to get even with the Egyptians, they probably would've done amateur stuff like toilet papering their houses or letting the air out of the tires of their chariots. But not God; he's a pro when it comes to judgment. There is the old saying, "the mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceeding fine."

God knows how to execute appropriate judgment in the sense of having the judgment fit the crime and hit where it hurts most. But God also can judge better than we can because God knows so much more than we do and is so much more fair and just and righteous than we ever can be. In a multitude of ways we can prejudge and misjudge. And so *God's presence with us demands that we refrain from being judgmental, and leave that up to God.*

Finally it can be said on the basis of this narrative from Exodus, that **God's presence with us demands the practice of worship.** "This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall

observe it as a perpetual ordinance." The word translated "ordinance" is the Hebrew word *hugqa* (hoo-kawh), which means a commandment, a decree, a custom, or a statute. In the particular word combination we find here, the meaning is that of an ongoing ordinance. It is a practice that is to continue and be passed on from one generation to another. As one commentator notes, the focus of these instructions is the children and what they will learn from these instructions about who God is and who they are [Brueggemann, *NIB*, p. 779].

God's presence with us demands that we acknowledge the "worship" of God, which literally is what it means to worship. We acknowledge how important God is for our lives by doing in worship exactly what this text from Exodus calls for: remembering all that God has done for us in the past and then celebrating all that God is doing currently and will do in the future. This custom of worship, this remembering and celebrating, is an ordinance that not only we as adults are to practice, but we are to insist our children do as well. It is what sets us apart. It is what makes us who we are. It is what forms our identity. It marks us as the people of God, the followers of Christ, one in the Spirit.

So based on this passage of scripture from Exodus, we can make the rather bold claim that *our presence in worship is not an option*. In the words of the Anglican Mass, "it is . . . our bounden duty that we

should . . . give thanks unto thee, O Lord, holy Father, almighty, everlasting God." Worship is a responsibility to be taken seriously. It is what we do because it is a central part of who we are.

We are those who gather together from our diverse everyday lives and join together as one on the first day of the week to remind each other of the demands of God's presence with us: that we order our lives in such a way as to reflect God's nature and character, that we maintain our community by being in solidarity with and sharing with people in need, that we seek not to be wasteful of what we have been given by God, that we always understand our faith as a journey with God, that we allow God alone to pass judgment, and that we continue to acknowledge God's value and worth in our lives by worshiping and teaching our children to do the same.

As I said in the beginning of the sermon, the presence of God does much for us. There is no denying that. It is the greatest of gifts and the most bountiful of blessings. But I believe that if we will be more concerned about what God's presence *demands of us* than we are about what God's presence *does for us*, then we will experience freedom, liberation, redemption, and salvation. For it is only our being obedient to these demands that will bring us genuine and authentic life, the opportunity to be the people, individually and collectively, God means for us to be and calls us to be.