NKMC Sermon

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Walk Each Other Home

It seems so funny to me, that the service where we celebrate our return to regular church activities after the scattering of summer is called *Homecoming Sunday.* I’m from small town Kansas, and homecoming in that context always involved considerably more football and glitter (although probably a similar amount of pulled pork) as our Homecoming celebration here. But it felt like a gift this week, to have the Homecoming theme to reflect on as I sat with the scripture provided by the Revised Common Lectionary. As I thought my way through the Exodus passage of the First Passover and Paul’s words to those first Christians in Rome, I also got to think about our church and what it means to come home.

I want to start today by reading through the Exodus text which offers both a profound vision of the church as *home* and simultaneously makes me want to scream at God. We will then temper the Exodus text by looking at Paul’s words in Romans which reinterpret the Exodus text through Christ’s love. We will conclude by thinking about our own church context, about what it means to come home here and the ways in which we can make this home.

The Passover text in Exodus 12 is a text that at first glance, we are likely to, well, pass over. At first glance it is terribly boring, a list of instructions on eating a meal that ends with the theological nightmare of God promising to kill all the firstborn Egyptians and livestock while sparing those of Israelite descent. Yet this is one of the most important texts in the Jewish tradition and one that profoundly shapes our own Christian faith. And while the importance of it for the Christian faith is often expressed through the parallel between the sacrificial lamb of the meal and Jesus, “the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (as John is quoted from the Gospel of John); I am intentionally going to avoid preaching a sermon on atonement theology (if you want to talk about it, I’m in the office Tuesday and Thursday this week), and instead focus on how this text can inform our understanding of the church as home.

Exodus 12 is a text of orientation. It is a text where God gives the gifts of ritual and remembrance. At this point in the Exodus story, the wheels of liberation have really started turning. God has sent down terrible plague after terrible plague and still Pharaoh will not budge. So God prepares to send one final, terrible, genocidal plague that will eventually have the Egyptians begging the Israelites to leave. But first God must prepare the Israelites for their journey. God is not just sending them on a physical journey out of Egypt but on a spiritual journey to a new way of being, one that is to free them from the abuse and exploitation of their oppressors. So God begins by telling Moses and Aaron that the Israelites are to mark their year not by the Egyptian calendar, but by the date where they begin their final preparations to be set free. God instructs them to orient their years not on the calendar forced upon them by their oppressor, but rather on the calendar given to them by God. A calendar which starts with God’s liberating act.

But what I love about this reorienting, is that it doesn’t start on the day they cross the red sea. Rather, it starts two weeks in advance, when each household unit (or joint units in the case of small households) is to set aside a year-old, unblemished male lamb. At the end of the two weeks, they are to butcher the lamb with the rest of the congregation at twilight and smear the blood on the doorposts so that God knows to pass over them. (Which is really terrifying and gross, and we’ll look at the God-passing-over-part further in a bit.) But for now, I want us to think about the two-week preparation period. For me, it’s this period which makes it all make sense. As Christians, we have our own calendar. The church year begins on first advent. And like the Israelites and those final two weeks they spent preparing for God to set them free from the Egyptians, we too have the period of preparation before our big events: advent before Christmas and lent before Easter. We too have been given the gift of orientation around God’s liberating act as we celebrate it through Jesus Christ, just as the Israelites were to orient their lives around their own liberation from the Egyptians.

But the Exodus text does not end there, and the gift of ritual is given as part of the gift of orientation. Once the lamb is butchered, they are to eat it not raw or in a stew or even boiled in a pot of water but the way the shepherds and the fugitives ate it: roasted whole over an open fire with no leftovers and served with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Furthermore, they are to eat it ready for a journey: tunic tied up out of the way (loins girded), shoes on, and staff in hand; and they are to eat hurriedly. Most importantly, this manner of eating was not a one-off, it was to become part of an annual festival of remembrance and worship to celebrate and live into this great thing God had done for them. God knew the journey ahead would be rough both physically and spiritually and so God gave the Israelites the gift of ritual by which they could remember God’s plan and purpose. This is the gift we partake in, in our own way, when we eat the bread and the wine each time we take communion.

At this point, the Exodus text culminates in the promise of God’s final, horrific act that will get the Israelites out of the land of Egypt: God is going to pass through in the night and kill the firstborns of the land of Egypt. The depth of this destruction is unimaginable, this makes Herod or Pharoah going after the firstborn baby boys seem like an act of mercy. Every firstborn regardless of current age and the firstborn from each livestock will be killed. This is a horrible image of God and while it certainly struck fear into the Egyptians and it demonstrates God’s power which is far, far greater than that of Pharoah, it’s an image of a relentless, violent, unmerciful God that I resist.

To read this text in a way that keeps us from throwing out the ritual and remembrance with the image of a violent God, we must read it with Jesus. Paul’s words in the Roman’s lectionary text for today allow us to do just that. “Owe no one anything, except to love one another,” Paul begins in Romans 13:8. While this was practical advice (and, like his later appeal to put on the light of salvation for the time is near, it is advice rooted in the “be ready” nature of the Passover), it is also advice that forces us to reconcile the Passover story with Jesus. We can’t just sit and wait for God to kill our enemies like the ancient Israelites: our call is to learn to love them even as we resist them. This is our reorientation, this is our liberation. For the Romans to whom Paul was writing, it took place in recognizing the roots of the Hebrew law were love (verses 9-10) and living in a way that reflected the true goodness of Jesus Christ (verses 13-14).

But what does this mean—what does all of this mean—in the context of our own church and in our own lives? If you have asked me how I am doing over the past few weeks, you have probably received an answer that sounded something like this, “I am doing pretty well, but busy. It’s canning season.” As George and I have settled into the rhythms of marriage and family life over the past few years, the season which orients our lives is harvest season. By far, it is the busiest season as George harvests and we butcher deer and as we can and freeze the produce we grow and are given. In a way, this is our advent and our lent. It is the time I feel most spiritually connected to God by living out the knowledge passed down to me by the women who also passed down their faith. It is the time we celebrate the good gifts of creation and God’s abundance in overwhelming gratitude as we try to live into right relationships with the earth. But it also a time when we lament all the ways we feel trapped—that our society is trapped—into a way of life that distracts us from the Divine and the call to care for the earth. And when I pull a jar of tomatoes off my basement shelf in January to add to venison stew with potatoes, carrots, and onions from my garden, I remember all of this and am once again reminded to keep seeking right relationship with God and with all God has created.

Now, I’m not saying preserving vegetables and hunting for wild game is a replacement for church, although there is no judgement here if you need to spend the occasional Sunday walking through the woods instead of sitting a pew. But what I’m asking of you and asking of myself, is how can we let God be our orientation? And how can we live that out as a congregation? And how can we do that, not only during those intentional preparation periods of Advent and Lent, but during all that ordinary time in between—those January nights of our lives?

The thing I have learned about canning this year—5 months pregnant with a toddler—is that it is a lot of work. The romance and novelty of living off the land is there, but often hard to find under the cracks and callouses on my hands, the ache in my feet and legs, and the half of my kitchen table that seems to be perpetually filled with jars either coming or going. But I’m committed to this, for myself and for my children. I want them to know that our food comes from the earth, that it takes work to get it on the table, and that all of that is a gift from God (and don’t worry, Brian also knows what a frozen pizza is, largely thanks to my lack of desire or energy to cook anything in the middle of canning. And I also want to give the disclaimer that I’m privileged that I can work half time and focus on my household in this way because George has a salary that allows this). But I’m using this analogy to say that orienting our lives around God takes work. It takes intentional effort. It takes a choice. It takes effort even when we don’t feel like it.

A part of orienting our lives around God, a big part, is coming to church on Sunday morning to worship. Scripture tells us again and again how to worship and when to worship and that God wants us to gather together as a congregation and praise the one who made us (and most of that is hidden in boring Old Testament texts). Now I don’t want to make anyone who doesn’t come to church regularly feel guilty and my heart is with those who want to be here and physically can’t. But what I hope I’m doing, is sending out an invitation. Come, come when you’re tired and weary, come when your life is filled with joy or with sorrow, come when you know every hymn and come when they’re all new, come when you are aching to hear every word of scripture spoken and take the message to heart, and come when you know you’ll be looking at your watch the whole time wondering if you’ll be home in time to catch the kick-off of the football game. Some days you’ll know you’ve encountered God in the music or the words or the people you greet, and some days you wont. Come anyway. Come because the orientation towards God that comes when we make Sunday morning worship a priority, is an orientation that trickles into the rest of the days of our lives.

Some of you may be thinking that I have it easy. I’m the pastor, I have to be here on Sunday morning in church even when I’d rather be sitting on the couch with a cup of coffee or going for a walk around my neighborhood. And there is no denying that some days that is what I would rather be doing—my household getting ready for church does not look any different than any other household with a one-year-old doing the same. George and I know that in order for me to do this work, in order for me to respond to the bewildering call to ministry that God has given me (and all of the Sunday mornings and committee meetings and after working hours visits and ability to be on call when needed it entails), we will not be able to participate in society in the ways that have become normative. There are things—good things, fun things, beneficial things—that we will say no to. Our kids will be limited in the extra curricular activities they do, we will be limited in our own evening activities, we will need to be intentional about carving out space to rest and be together on the weekend because Sunday mornings will never be an option for that, and we will always be navigating the aspects of church life that are because they are my job and those that are because we are part of a congregation.

Yet we do this—not because I’m afraid I’ll end up under some withering plant like Jonah if I don’t answer the call (God has called me to live as a Christian in other ways)—but because how we spend our days is how we live our lives and we want to live our lives for the Lord. And choosing church lets us live in community, in rhythms of grace, in spaces that force us to focus on what really matters and let’s us let go of all that society tells us we should be and have. Being tied to the church, being committed to God’s orientation in our lives, forces us to be intentional about how we spend our days: if I’m so busy (as a pastor who has to be here) that I spend the hour of worship thinking about what we’re having for suppers next week, then I’m probably not spending any real, intentional time with God throughout the week. And when I stop doing that, I forget who I am (really, Whose I am) and who I have been called to be as a child of God.

This grounding, this orientation, was something given to me by my parents and the most important thing I can pass on to my children. I was raised in a totally imperfect church community (and really the totally imperfect is redundant) and yet somehow it was to me a place where I was loved simply because I had been created by God. For our children, church is a space where they won’t be competing, where they wont be judged on how well they do or do not do something, where the pressure to excel at a particular skill is replaced with an attentiveness to their gifts and the call to love. When we choose to be the church together, we give each other the knowledge that we are deeply and unconditionally loved by a God who is LOVE and that when crap hits the fan, that love will endure. This is the narrative that changes our lives over and over and over again and allows us to live in love and grace: free in Christ. This the orientation we have been called to by God. It is an enduring, lasting, timeless orientation that we figure out how to live in our own places and times. It is one of perpetual home.

So this fall, I want us as a congregation to come home to who we were made to be. And for us to acknowledge that this is already happening here. It happens over platz and coffee after working in the gardens together. It happens when one of our caregivers steps away from their own busy lives and purchases food for someone in need. It happens when we give each other rides and visit each other when we’re sick and bring food after someone dies. These things are ordinary yet they’re extraordinary because they shape us as people who live by Christ’s love. And like those ancient Israelites, who accepted the gifts of ritual and remembrance, who were all set up to be freed by God and went out into the desert with a host of complaints and a golden calf, we’ll mess up sometimes—we’re human after all—but when we keep showing up and figuring out this life together with Christ, we’ll end up doing what we have been called to do all along: walk each other home.