

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, 9/10/2017, Exodus 12:1-14 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

We skipped significant parts of the Exodus story from last week, when Moses encountered the burning bush, to this week, when God tells Moses and Aaron how the Israelites need to prepare for the Passover event, which will be the tenth plague. So, we skipped all the other plagues: water turning into blood, frogs, vermin, flies, pestilence, boils, hail, locusts, and darkness.

Now the terrible tenth plague has been announced, the death of firstborns; and in today's passage, the people are told how to prepare for this, that is, for their own households to be passed over as this plague visits all those who enslave them.

I read today's Old Testament reading about preparing for the Passover event on Thursday in my office, when also being bombarded with advice about preparing for Hurricane Irma. Friends in Florida began evacuating. Friends in the Carolinas kept watch.

Living in Virginia, we know how to make a hurricane kit: a gallon of water per person per day, canned foods, batteries, flashlights, radio. While Irma may not pose much of a threat to us here, most of us know people in Florida and other affected places. How do we prepare for a disaster happening to other people? Irma has devastated and will devastate others. Some lives will become divided into before and after this event. This will be a defining event for many.

Do you have times like that?

Life before children, and after children.

Life before 9-11, and after.

Life before marriage, and after.

Life before a loved one died, and after.

What have been defining moments for you?

Are any related to spirituality?

Are any related to this church?

For the past two weeks, and for the next several weeks, we will be reading snippets from the book of Exodus, when the enslaved Israelites left Egypt. The Exodus from Egypt was a defining moment in the Old Testament, much as the cross was a defining moment in the New Testament.

Were the Israelites prepared by this passage today for the Passover? Were they prepared for the Exodus?

Was Jesus prepared for the cross? Were his disciples?

Last Sunday in our Gospel reading, Jesus tried to prepare his disciples, but they were not listening, were they? Last week, Peter asked Jesus to *stop speaking*. When Jesus talked about undergoing great suffering, being killed, and being raised on the third day, Peter, remember—skillfully read by a brown-bearded Cameron for Youth Sunday—Peter replied “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”

Getting prepared in the Old Testament went a little better than the preparations in the Gospel last week.

Are you prepared?

We’ve all been seeing back-to-school displays ever since the Fourth of July decorations disappeared from shelves, as parents and students prepare for a return to school. Last Sunday, we blessed backpacks to help students and teachers prepare.

Here at St. David’s over the summer, we’ve been doing a lot of work to prepare for our program year, which starts today, as Sunday School begins again. We have a dynamic new vestry since May, a vestry committed to growth and health. To finding new ways to serve our community, even without the beloved preschool that we had for 37 years.

Some preparations are tough. The preparations described in today’s Exodus reading are pretty terrifying. Eat the lamb hurriedly. I will pass through land. I will strike down the firstborn.

Preparing for hurricanes is terrifying. I’m from the desert. I used to love big storms, because in the desert, rain is so rare that it’s always a celebration. But I haven’t felt the same way about storms ever since a tree fell on my house six years during a storm. That storm wasn’t only about the weather. I was new here, felt totally inadequate as a rector, and learned that some of my new parishioners found me pretty inadequate too. My husband had recently retired, which those of you who are retired know is a stressful change; and, his father had just died. We had been unable to sell our house in Virginia Beach, but had bought a new one here. We had finally finished unpacking: and then a tree crashed on our new house.

I don’t even remember the name of that storm now, but I am pretty sure it wasn’t even a hurricane when that happened. One tree down does not compare to what residents of Texas have been dealing with and what Florida residents now face. Besides these two major hurricanes back to back, Mexico experienced an earthquake, and several states have experienced extreme wildfires. Many of us feel helpless.

How do we prepare for these things?

We give money, we look for ways to serve. And we come to church and we pray together. We gather around this table. We prepare as best we can.

This summer, our preschool was basically disassembled. We had a reception. We did our best to honor the ministry that took place here for decades, but preparing for what's next was challenging. It's a tough time of year right now, when kids would be heading back to school, but they aren't back to school in our preschool.

Even so, positive preparations have been happening. The nursery and the back rooms have been painted, set up, and are now ready for use. Our buildings and grounds team has been working overtime. The ping pong table is repaired. Our youth have a place where the couch and the ping pong table can stay set up, instead of being crammed into the showers periodically when the room needs to be set up for a special function.

The building was powerwashed this past week. We have a new roof overhead, which is important when storms are headed our way. We have a new stone out in the Memorial Garden, as sadly, our other memorial stones were filled up.

Sue Davis, our Director of Child and Youth Formation, worked hard preparing all summer, when she had a bit of a break from her full-time teaching job, as well as the seminary classes she's taking. She prepared for this year's Sunday School, recruiting teachers and solidifying curricula. She even made some amazing finger labyrinths for our children's worship bags. Our Christian Formation vestry liaison Brent Hoard has also been working feverishly to prepare for the program year.

This is a time of year for preparation, for beginnings, even as it's also a time when the calendar year draws to a close. When the leaves turn brown and fall off the trees. When the ruby-throated hummingbirds we've been feeding all summer are preparing to fly south, leaving us for about six months for warmer climates.

It's such a contrast today, isn't it, between excited preparations for our church program year, and watching the news for more destruction. Seeing our freshly painted rooms, experiencing our new roof and cleaned building, and thinking of Episcopal friends who will return to their churches and homes and find them flooded.

How have you prepared for church today?

Now, if you didn't do anything to prepare to come to church, if that's not part of your practice, please don't feel guilty. Showing up is enough. But today's Exodus reading helps us to see merits of preparation. All of these commands of God become part of the liturgy of Passover.

Kind of like the last supper, when Jesus was preparing his disciples for his impending arrest, torture, and death, has become part of our liturgy. Eucharist, communion, sharing the body and blood: what happened on that night, the preparations, are very deliberate in how we honor Christ each week.

Nourishing ourselves with the body and blood of Christ is one way to prepare for a storm. Gathering around this table. Serving each other the bread and wine, just as Jesus did. It's our central act of worship.

If all you did to prepare today was show up, that's enough, because what we have shared together so far is preparation for that moment when we take the bread, the wine, and consume them. Reading Scripture, ruminating, singing, praying: all of what we do together prepares us for that act, when we remember an event that happened thousands of years ago, an event that divided time into before and after.

Perhaps this year can become a time for us that will be divided into before and after, a time when you and I truly began following the way of Jesus.