

*The Journey of Worship, Pt. 1*  
***A Story to Live From***  
Exodus 12: 21-28

**First Presbyterian Church**  
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The world is full of stories. I don't just mean little stories like Goldilocks or What I Did on My Vacation. I mean big stories, narratives, which have the power to shape the way we live. There are competing stories in the world around us. Some of them inspire us, some infuriate us. Some want to frighten us into submission or entice us into agreement. The fact is, we all live out of stories. We have a life narrative that tells us how our lives are supposed to go. These internal stories shape what we expect to happen, what strive to make happen, and how we explain what actually does happen. The big stories in the world get inside our minds and start to affect our personal stories. They shape the way we view life and the world. This is true even for people who say, "I don't live by anybody's story. I just do what I do." In fact, the more unconscious we are of which stories shape our lives, the more influenced we are by whatever narrative dominates the atmosphere of the moment. Big stories have big power.

Let's try an experiment. I'm going to give you four words. I'm going to say them slowly and ask that you notice how you feel when you hear each word. I'd like us to become aware of what thoughts go through our minds when we hear these words. Ready? Here we go. *Trump. Hillary. ISIS. Transgender.* I'll say them again and ask you to consider if you have any strong reaction to any of these words, whether positive or negative. *Trump. Hillary. ISIS. Transgender.*

Each of these words represents a cultural narrative. A story that wants to express and direct a particular way of life. The political candidates are easy. They want you to know the narrative of their campaigns, and both of them are trying to tap into a story that's in the minds of voters. Donald Trump's slogan is "Make America Great Again." Here's the narrative. "Once we were a great nation. Now we are not. I know you're mad about it. I'm going to get it back. I'll protect *you* from *them*."

Hillary Clinton's slogan is "Fighting for You." Her narrative has been spun for years. "There is a vast, right-wing conspiracy. Those people with money and privilege don't want you to have any. I'm going to fight to get it for you."

The ISIS narrative is almost unanimously negative in our culture. “We want Islamic law to rule the world. Anything else is heresy and corruption. So we will advance an Islamist state until the whole world is under Sharia law. Then Allah will be pleased and the world will be at peace.” Yikes.

The transgender narrative declares, “I have the right to be whichever gender I identify with. My feelings and thoughts about my sex determine what sex I will be more than my biology. So I want the power, the money and the freedom to make choices about what we used to think was determined.”

This last narrative still seems shocking to many of us. Because there’s this little matter of the x and y chromosomes, and the well-established difference in neurobiology between the sexes. But actually, the narrative of transgender rights is just the latest tip of a huge iceberg of a story growing under the surface of our culture. The story that fuels it is one in which we all willingly participate: I get to make my life what I want it to be. We tell our children all the time, “You can be whatever you want to be. If you just truly believe in yourself and try to the best of your ability, you can achieve, and be, anything.” This Disney-sweet story is, of course, a big fat lie. It’s rooted in *existentialism*, the philosophy that each one of us must create our own realities. We all eat and breathe and pretty much believe this story every day: “I belong to myself. I have the right to feel whatever I feel and to do whatever arises from those feelings. That’s freedom. My life is mine and it’s on me to figure out the best life for me.” Of course, as our levels of anxiety, depression, fear and hopelessness bear out, this narrative cannot sustain us over the long term. I can’t fulfill myself in myself. I can’t solve the mysteries of death, guilt, or loneliness.

So these and many other big stories are banging into us all the time. They contradict each other. They compete for our allegiance and our dollars. They try to mold our behavior to fit into the story with others. It’s exhausting. Because none of these stories are working. And that, precisely, is why we’re here. We’ve come to be taken into the one story that is true. We’ve come to be included in a story that claims us utterly, but in doing so actually delivers what it promises: forgiveness, peace, everlasting life.

In some ways, I’m really glad that no one has to come to church any more out of social duty. We’re here because we want to be, not just because we should be. And we’re not here because church is part of a nice life. Church is a matter of life and death in a vicious world of intense pressure and cruel destruction. We’re

here because we need the better story. We require the one true story that makes sense of all the other stories

My passion is that every single Sunday becomes a *significant event* in each of our lives. An event in which the stakes involved in daily choices are laid out. An event of deep realism about who we are and what happens in the world. An event in which the struggle over which story I will let claim me gets played out. An event during which I acknowledge that I have lived from false stories and suffered consequences. An event in which the story of everlasting life is told and I am invited to let my story get taken up in that grand, life-giving story. An event in which Jesus Christ appears as the main actor on the stage. For as we present him faithfully, Jesus faithfully arrives in our midst as:

- The forgiver of sinners,
- The redeemer of the enslaved,
- The victor for the failing,
- The peace-giver of the anxious,
- The stain-remover of the guilty,
- The hope-creator for the despairing, and
- The renewer for the entire creation.

In short, every worship service is a gospel event. An event in which the good news of what Jesus did in the world, in history, once and for all, becomes a powerful force in our lives. In worship, what occurred in the past can become a present reality for each of us. When we encounter Jesus through our worship, we meet a living person who has the power to redeem us now. For the gospel, the good news that God has come to save us in the man Jesus Christ, is *our primary worship value*. Jesus is what we do here, in song, in Word, in prayer and in sacrament.

So in the second half of this message today, I'd like to show you the connection between Exodus, Jesus, and our lives now. I hope to show you how all three come together in worship. This morning, our passage from Exodus 12 was about Passover. The LORD told Moses about what would soon happen. In reply to Pharaoh's continued hardness of heart, an angel of death would pass through the land. But all those who had the blood of the lamb upon their door, and who had partaken of that lamb in a feast, would be spared. On that night, God's people would be set free. God spared us death and led us out of slavery. This night would be so significant that God's people would remember it forever. It would become their defining story. And so there would be an annual festival of worship to

remember it. And every time they kept that festival, the power of the story would come flooding into their present lives, even many generations later.

Passover and Exodus together became the foundational event in the life of God's people. The LORD I AM intervened in the world to save his people and set them free. Passover recalled both parts of this event: the passing over of the homes covered in the blood of the lamb and the passing through the waters of the Red Sea to freedom. They were two distinct events that always went together. The pass over and the pass through. The seven day feast remembered both parts of the story:

And when your children say to you, "*What do you mean* by this service? You shall say, "It is the sacrifice of the LORD's Passover, for he passed over the house of the people of Israel in Egypt when he struck the Egyptians but spared our houses." (Ex. 12: 26).

*Remember* this day in which you came out from Egypt, out of the house of slavery, for by a strong hand the LORD brought you out of this place... You shall tell your son on that day, "It is because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt." (Exodus 13: 3, 8).

In the worship of the annual festival, the people through the centuries identified themselves with these events of the Passover and the pass through. Every year they said, in effect, "We were there. When God did these things, it was for us." Biblical remembering is not just recalling. It's remembering in a way that makes the power of the past event present in the lives of believers, as if they were there.

Now here's the connection. Jesus is our Passover. The day he died, Jesus was the lamb without blemish. He was the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. The consequence of human sin is death and judgment. By the blood of Jesus on the doorposts of our hearts, the judgement of God passes over us without condemnation. The blood of the lamb covers our sins and spares us the wrath of God against human rebellion. Jesus is our Passover. So Paul could write, "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us, therefore let us keep the feast" (I Co. 5:7).

Jesus is also our Exodus! He passed through the Red Sea on our behalf. He went through the depths of death for us. He passed through this death and returned to life. He returned to his Father in his ascension, having made a new and living way for us. Now when we pass through the waters of death, they do not overwhelm us. Death is no longer the final word. For Jesus' resurrection is the

guarantee of our Exodus through the sea of death into everlasting life. Jesus' exodus from this world into his Father's presence has opened heaven to all believers.

From the beginning the church has connected the Passover in the days of Egypt with the Passover of Jesus' death and resurrection. His blood made the cleansing forgiveness possible. His resurrection opened the way of life.

It is no accident that the last night before the cross, Jesus kept the Passover feast with his disciples. It is no accident that on the night in which he was betrayed, during the meal that recalled the mighty events of the Passover and the Exodus, Jesus told his disciples that it was actually all about him. He took up the unleavened bread of the Passover feast and said, "This is my body, broken for you." During the meal, four cups of wine were drunk, each one commemorating part of the Passover and exodus. Jesus took up the third cup, the cup of God's judgment on Pharaoh's sin, and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." As the lamb slain for our sins, Jesus took the judgment of God against human sin so that we might go free.

The first Passover night, the people were told that they not only had to put the blood of the lamb on the doorposts of their homes. They had to eat the lamb as part of a feast celebrating God's faithfulness and his deliverance. They participated in the sacrifice of the lamb by eating it. This showed faith that they believed God would do what he promised. And, it is no accident that Jesus, during Passover, linked the sacred meal to himself and declared, "Eat this remembering me. Drink this in remembrance of me."

The sacred supper is the way Jesus gave us to get in on what he has done. It is the way our lives get taken up in his story. We participate in his story as we recall what he said. As we believe in what he accomplished. As we eat and drink him through the work of the Holy Spirit. He gave us baptism as the sign of our first joining to him. He gave us this sacred supper as the way he continually reforms us. Jesus calls us to participate in this meal. Why? In order that through it he might rescue us from all the deadly, disappointing stories the world pumps into our brains. In worship, we get relocated from the false stories into the true stories. We tell the story, we sing the story, and we pray the story. The story that is gospel, good news of forgiveness, peace and new life. And today, we get to participate in this story as we partake of Christ our Passover. Today we get linked to him, to his death that atones for sin, to his resurrection that gives us everlasting life. As we eat and drink, we get written into this grand, life giving story.