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Maundy Thursday B
Peace, Seattle
April 5, 2012
Exodus 12:1-14

TASTE OF FREEDOM

After hiking five miles in the snow, through fields of standing corn and over frozen lakes in the dead of a Minnesota winter, every one of us in Troop 72 was famished.

But we all knew there would be nothing to eat until a fire was going. So, gathering wood quickly, we built a kindling tipi over thin strips of birch bark, put a match to it, and waited—all eight pairs of eyes eager and focused—for smoke and flame to rise.

What we were after, what we needed for cooking, were hot coals, so we tended the growing fire with studious care, feeding ever larger pieces into the flames at careful intervals, until the crack and pop of the wood and the enveloping warmth convinced us the fire would succeed.

Then, reaching into our green canvas knapsacks, we took out the aluminum foil pouches we'd packed at home before our journey began. Pouches filled with chunks of carrot, potato, and onion, and seasoned with pepper and salt, with a large paddy of hamburger in the middle.

And as soon as the flames died down enough, we tossed our treasures onto the coals, sat back, and waited for the sizzle and the mouthwatering aroma that signaled dinner was on its way.

When the meal was ready—and figuring that out was always a bit tricky—we pulled the pouches off the coals with pairs of sticks, opened them up, and dug in to what, even 40 years later, was one of the best meals I've eaten in my life!

Meals to remember. What's on your list? And how did it get there?

Some meals stand out from all the rest. The first date; the wedding feast; the last taste of home before going away; the first meal alone after years of partnership.

Sometimes the menu or the occasion is everything. But other times it's neither the menu nor the occasion but the company we keep that's memorable; or the setting.

In tonight's first lesson, it's all of the above.

God's people are poised on the edge of something that they cannot fully grasp, and won't for many years—even generations. The menu is lamb and unleavened bread; the occasion is their last meal together in Egypt; the company they keep is all those whose doorposts have been marked with the blood of the lamb; and the setting is the land of captivity—Pharaoh's land—which they will soon be seeing in the rearview mirror.

There's an urgency is in the air of this story from Exodus. Can you feel it? Listen:

> This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the Passover of the LORD.[1]

[1] Exodus 12:11, NRSV

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There's no time for yeast; no time to boil water. No time to prepare the animal in the usual way—just roast it quickly over the fire. Make certain your shoes are laced and ready, your hiking staff is in hand, your walking clothes are on, your pack is strapped on your back, for the time for which you have been waiting, is at hand; in the morning, you will be refugees.

Refugees. How many millions know this story from the INSIDE. Of having to flee at a moment's notice, in the night, not knowing where they are going, but only that it must be better than here.

South Sudan, Congo, Somalia, Syria, Libya, Haiti, Palestine, Columbia, Afghanistan.

We cannot hear this text without recalling the places of crisis in our world and the millions who seek safe haven from violence or natural disasters that have turned living into a nightmarish struggle for survival.

Nor can we hear this text without remembering the times, repeated through the past three millennia, when Jewish people have been forced to flee their homes in order to escape the latest pogrom, the latest state-sanctioned horror, the latest atrocity; fleeing with the clothes on their backs to parts unknown.

> Who can forget Tevye from Fiddler on the Roof explaining, with his beleaguered face, why he and his fellow villagers always wear their hats.[2]

But this story of a meal shared under conditions of exile may evoke memories much closer at hand. Of a homeless encampment, where chicken casseroles, hot beverages, and bread are received as if it is the food of the Promised Land.[3]

Of a place just over the hill where tents serve as homes, and newer shelters, built with component walls, are held together not with nails but with screws so that, when the need arises, they can be taken apart quickly carted to a new location, and reassembled.

> This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly.

The contexts may vary, but the experience of exile, the longing for a place to call home, a place where you can take your shoes off and put the walking stick away for a while, these are basic human longings. And our text reminds us of that tonight.

Yet it does more than simply remind. It asserts something. It tells us:

> This is the Passover of the LORD.

That is—it tells us that GOD is somehow mixed up in all this. GOD is at work here, and not just any parochial or territorial God, but a God who aligns himself with those who are in bondage.

A God intent on bringing Israel, bringing us, out from under the regime of enslavement and to liberate us from everyone and everything that would bind us.

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[2] *Fiddler on the Roof,* 1971, Norman Jewison, director. Noted by Gregory Ledbetter, *Feasting on the Word, Year B: Volume 2.* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008) p. 259.

[3] Members of Peace and Calvary Lutheran congregations served dinner at the "Nicklesville" homeless encampment on the edge of the Duwamish River Valley last week. These two paragraphs recall that experience.

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The meal that Jesus shared with his friends and followers on the night that he was arrested was this same Passover meal; a meal with over a thousand years of tradition by the time Jesus celebrated it.

When Jesus gathered in the Upper Room with his disciples on the night before he was crucified, they ate and drank around this story of liberation. But then in the midst of this ancient meal, Jesus did something new. Something that no one else had done before.

He took these ancient symbols of the bread of affliction and the cup of redemption, and gave them new meaning. The bread was now his body. The wine was now his blood. He was the lamb.
But the intent was the same: liberation…freedom from all that binds us and keeps us from being in the world as God intended from the very beginning.

DO THIS, Jesus said, IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME.

Ever since that night, Christian communities throughout the world…
…at many different times and places,
…under ordinary and extraordinary circumstances
…have gathered together to break bread and share from the cup in response to the Lord's command.

There is nothing more essential to Christian community life than sharing in this meal.

For this meal is more than remembering, as powerful of an experience as remembering can be.
And this meal is different than nostalgia, a longing for things as we picture them, but which, in reality, they never really were.

In this meal Christ becomes present to us here and now.
The liberation he promises becomes ours right now.

It is, true, a foretaste of the heavenly banquet; and yet at the same time, we remember its roots as a stand-around meal hastily prepared—hastily eaten, for a community's journey.[4]

So as we gather around the Table this night to receive Christ's body and blood, we are no longer a group of refugees or oppressors; and we become at that moment <u>more</u> than a group of individuals; we become <u>his body</u>, <u>his community</u> in the world, a <u>people</u> called to proclaim and to live as his witnesses, to live out the rhythm of the cross and the resurrection in our life together, until he comes again.

LET US PRAY:
Lord Christ, feed us with your body and blood, that we may be freed, restored, and united as one with your Body, the church, throughout the world, and equipped for mission and service, for feeding and washing, both near at hand, and across the globe. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

[4] David J. Schlafer, *New Proclamation, Year B 2008-2009* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008) p. 231.