



North Shore
Congregational
Church

FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“Delivered: A ??? of Praise”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Exodus 13:3-16

October 1, 2026

As part of the Broadway series that Sharon and I attend at the Marcus center, we saw the musical Spamalot back in July. Now, for those of you who know Monty Python’s comedy, you will be able to picture it. For those who don’t, I’m not sure how to put a face on it except to say that the Musical, based on an earlier movie, is a British satire centered on King Arther and the Knights of the Round Table in search of the Holy Grail. Anyway, there’s one scene in which they are up against a particularly difficult foe – that being a ferocious rabbit – against whom they decide to use the Holy Hand Grenade of Antioch. Of course, no one knows exactly how to use the Holy Hand Grenade of Antioch, so they turn to the Holy Book of Armaments, chapter 2, vs. 9-21.

Which read, in part...

*And the Lord spake, saying, First shalt
thou take out the Holy Pin.*

*Then, shalt thou count to three, no more,
no less.*

*Three shalt be the number thou shalt
count, and the number of the counting
shalt be three.*

*Four shalt thou not count,
nor either count thou two, excepting that
thou then proceed to three.*

Five is right out.

*Once the number three,
being the third number, be reached, then
lobbest thou thy Holy Hand Grenade of
Antioch...*

The portrayal of the scene in the musical is one in which every time people think the reader is done and begin to act, he continues on with more detail – more instruction – more minutia. As I sat in the audience and laughed in the moment, however, I did so in part because I think we can all start to feel that way about some of these passages that arise in Old Testament narrative. “You shall keep this observance in this month. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a festival to the Lord. Unleavened bread shall be eaten for seven days; no leavened shall be seen in your possession, and no leaven shall be seen among you in all your territory.” You can start to see the parallels.

Now, that outline of the Festival of Unleavened Bread is just a taste of some of the minutia to come. Elsewhere in the book of Exodus we read about the Passover, the Festival Weeks, the Festival of Booths, the sabbath, the tabernacle, and more. And that's just a taste of what exist elsewhere in the Torah – those first five books of our Old Testament. The point, however, is that the 21st century reader can become bemused, if not completely disengaged, when we start getting into these detail-ridden passages delineating the rituals of the faith. Perhaps second only to the genealogies that immediately put us to sleep, I think the 21st century Christian reader doesn't know what to do with all of that. I would contend that at least part of the answer to that question, however, lies in a clearer understanding of that which we are reading.

Bear with me for just a couple minutes on this. When we read these texts, it's imperative to understand how they came to be. I think it's easy for us to consciously or subconsciously fall into the trap of reading these stories as though Moses wrote his autobiography or there was some scribe along for the journey taking notes as events occurred. The truth, however, is that the story was told and retold through oral tradition for generations – centuries – and those retellings each had purposes and focuses of their own. Some were focused on the omnipotence and majesty of God. Some were focused on the human connection with God. Some were focused on worship and ritual. Some were more concerned with the Law and human behavior. To be clear, none were right or wrong, but the focus of their retelling impacted how the story was retold. And then, all those years later – centuries after the events took place – people set to the task combining all of those varied oral traditions into the text that we read today.

I say all of that, however, because understanding that the text we are reading was written so many generations later helps to inform what we can do with the sometimes-mind-numbing minutia of these ritualistic delineations. What we read as God's proclamation of how the people are to remember these events is, far more likely, the future practice of the people being written into the story to bring life to the connection and purpose that practice has in the faith of the people. It's unlikely that God indeed came down from on high and had Moses record such meticulous detail about how the people from heretofore were to ritualistically remember said event. What we have, instead, is a ritual and practice that had evolved in the faith being written back into the story to make clear why they do what they do and why they do it the way they do it. Said another way, it's not likely that God delineated the seven-day Festival of Unleavened Bread in this moment of the Exodus story. Far more likely is that this is how the people had come to be intentional about remembering the story in the centuries that followed, that they later wrote into the telling of the story itself. And that intentionality of remembrance and worship, I would suggest, is the echo that we need to hear today.

Consider, if you will, the words that come next in the 13th chapter of Exodus. The final plague is the death of the firstborns throughout Egypt – people and animal alike are all struck down in the final blow that leads to Pharaoh's ultimate release of the Israelites from bondage. In the verses that follow, however, we discover the notion that, in light of this act of God against the Egyptians, the first-borns of all Israel now belong to God. I'm starting with the 11th verse of the 13th chapter of Exodus.

“When the Lord has brought you into the land of the Canaanites, as he swore to you and your ancestors, and has given it to you, 12 you shall set apart to the Lord all that first opens the womb. All the firstborn offspring of your livestock that are males shall be the Lord's. 13 But every firstborn donkey you shall redeem with a sheep; if you do not redeem it, you must break its neck. Every firstborn male among your children you shall redeem. 14 When in the future your child asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ you shall answer, ‘By strength of hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. 15 When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the Lord killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from human firstborn to the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to the Lord every male that first opens the womb, but every firstborn of my sons I redeem.’ 16 It shall serve as a sign on your hand and as an emblem on your forehead that by strength of hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt.” (Exodus 13:11-16)

Now, we can get into questions of sacrifice and what it means to ‘redeem’ and all such things in separate conversations – as we did this past Wednesday at the Bible discussion group. The key point for our purposes today, however, is this fundamental idea that what comes first belongs to God. We sometimes talk about it as ‘first fruits.’ In my vignette on social media about this chapter earlier this week I contrasted that notion of offering our first fruits to offering God our leftovers. And that, to me, is where all of this comes together.

I think the beauty of the somewhat meticulous detail of these ritualistic festivals and practices can sometimes be lost to the life experience and worldview of the 21st century Christian reader. The beauty that lies beneath the minutia, however, is the fundamental notion that this is the manner in which the people of God were being intentional about remembering that which God had done – and continues to do – in the life of God’s people. The timing and manner of things – so much more intricate than that which we are oft-accustomed to – serve to almost force the people to lean into these acts of remembrance and worship regardless of what else might be going on in life. This is their way of being intentional about worship and praise. More critically, this is a manner in which the people of God were ensuring that their worship and praise of God would be among the first fruits – the first priorities – of life. And we could all use that reminder now and then!

It’s old hat, at this point, to talk about the fading importance of faith practice amidst the ever-rising tide of competing priorities, and we quickly like to pass the buck and play the blame game as we start decry the loss of the sanctity of Sunday morning, the ever-creeping power of secularism, and so much more. The reality, however, is that we have far more agency in the priorities of life than we sometimes acknowledge. Whether we admit it or not – whether we even realize it or not – we chose that which we will prioritize in our days.

To be clear, this is not a question of what we are doing between 10 and 11 am on Sunday mornings. Our lives get full, and the schedule sometimes needs to flex to make room for things – and that’s ok. As much as the beauty of these ritualistic practices is that they force a prioritization of faith, their downside is that the excessive rigidity can lead to one picture, and one picture only, of what faithfulness must look like. The measure of faith quickly becomes the attendance rate, the giving amount, the service hours, the role on the board, or whatever else we’ve somehow designed as the face of faithfulness, and that couldn’t further from the point I’m trying to make.

I’m not suggesting we need to follow the pattern of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, or to redeem our firstborn from God, or to institute Passover regulations. Nor am I suggesting that we need to replace those notions with some meticulous minutia of our own. What I’m suggesting is that we need to take from these ritualistic narratives the fundamental necessity of prioritizing our faithfulness. I’m suggesting that faith ought to be – needs to be – must be – a question of first fruits. The point that I’m trying to make is that – whatever it looks like – we need to be intentional about the question of when and how we will live out our praise and worship of God.

I know that, in many ways, I’m preaching to the choir here. But the undeniable reality is that that every-growing tide of competing priorities makes it easier and easier for us to fall into that trap of giving God the leftovers – the energy, time, spirit and resource that remains once everything else has been taken care of. And once we’ve fallen into that trap, we’ve missed the basic point of what our faithfulness is meant to be and the mind-numbing minutia of these rituals becomes ever-more needed as a reminder of the intentionality to which we are called.

When Julia was first putting together the worship order for this morning, she came in to ask me if something was missing from the title of the sermon. Her understandable question was whether or not I

had intended to put a word that I simply had yet to figure out – that those questions marks were meant to be filled in. The answer, of course, is no – at least not by me. Because I can't figure out that word. I can't say what the act of praise for each of us will be today, tomorrow, or in the weeks ahead. Nor do I think it's the same from one of us to next, or from one of our days to another. My point is not to look towards the Festival of Unleavened Bread – nor anything else like it – and say we need to do that. If it works for you – great. If it doesn't – fine. That's not the point. The point is that we need to be intentional about filling in that blank. We need to be proactive about choosing what that word is going to be. In lives constantly filled with competing priorities, we need to make it our first act to decide when, where and how we will live out our praise. Then, with that intent clearly delineated, we begin to look towards all the rest.