

Exodus 12:1-4, 7, 11-14
A Lamb to Rescue
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Phil Staples was a man who faced death each and every day. “I’m one cheeseburger away from a heart attack,” he said to a perfect stranger at a truck stop in Winslow, Arizona. Phil weighed nearly 450 lbs. Not only that, but Phil suffered from an autoimmune disease called chronic urticaria, a condition in which his body would sporadically break out in large patches of hives. Most of all, he was discouraged, unable to see a way out of his captivity to food and inactivity. Three marriages later, with children he’d not seen in years, Phil’s prison cell was the cab of his 18-wheeler. His coping mechanism, fast food, every shape and size. Phil Staples was in need of a rescuer.

That day in Winslow, Arizona, he met a man named Joe Cross, who himself was on a journey of deliverance from the very same things. The story of these two men is the subject of a documentary film entitled *Fat, Sick and Nearly Dead*. For both of these men, their rescue would come in the form of a glass of vegetable juice.

That day, Joe gave Phil his contact information and told him if he was ever interested in his help in beginning his journey of regaining his health, he should call him. It wasn’t until months later that late one evening, Joe received a phone call from a broken man who was in need of rescuing. You see, that day in Arizona, Joe introduced Phil to a tangible element, a unique sort of meal that would be his deliverance.

Eugene Peterson in his memoir *The Pastor* says, “A life of faith cannot be lived in general or by abstractions. All of the great realities we can’t touch or see take shape on ground we can see.” We all need touchstones in our lives that show us the way to our rescue, something that we can see and touch and remember. For Phil it was juice; for the Israelites it was a lamb. Our Marker for today is a lamb.

I invite you to join me as we turn once again to the book of Exodus. Today, we’re in chapter 12. And I invite you to follow along with me as I recount the story of the Passover: God’s spiritual, physical and cosmic rescue of the people of Israel.

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, “This month shall be for you the beginning of months. It shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month every man shall take a lamb according to their fathers' houses, a lamb for a household. And if the household is too small for a lamb, then he and his nearest neighbor shall take according to the number of persons; according to what each can eat you shall make your count for the lamb....

They shall take some of the blood and put it n the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it....

In this manner you shall eat it: with your belt fastened, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. And you shall eat it in haste. It is the Lord's Passover. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. The blood shall be a sign for you, on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt.

“This day shall be for you a memorial day, and you shall keep it as a feast to the Lord; throughout your generations, as a statute forever, you shall keep it as a feast.”

Israel

The Israelites have been in Egypt for 430 years—a far cry from the promises made to Abraham. They have seen pharaohs come and go, and with each, their oppression and forced labor became more and more intense. Gone are the days when Israel remembered what it was like to be foreigners who were welcomed by Joseph their brother, right hand man to Pharaoh—to the storerooms of food and Egyptian hospitality. All they know now is the hard heart of Pharaoh and the hard hand of forced labor.

But things are about to change. Deliverance is on the way, and Israel’s story is about to turn a page. **But not before something important takes place.**

If you recall, the chapters that precede this one describe 9 plagues God unleashed upon Egypt. Plagues of locusts, frogs, disease, hail, darkness. Yet none of them were enough to get Pharaoh’s attention. Finally, God issues a final plague: death to the first-born throughout Egypt. With it, Israel would finally be set free.

But before their deliverance, Israel was given a marker to help them remember; before liberation comes liturgy.

I have an uncle named Kent, who operates a halfway house for men who are transitioning out of institutionalized life or recovering from addictions. I was asking him once about methods for transition, and he said this: “Before we begin working with these men on things like balancing a checkbook, or filling out job applications, or cooking for themselves—the things that will characterize their new life of sobriety—we worship, worship comes first. I believe they have to know the rhythm of God’s movement in their lives before they can understand and develop their own new rhythms of life. Before beginning a new life, a person has to know the one who is leading them out of the old life.” And the one who is leading them out is God, in the person of Jesus Christ.

Israel’s rescue would come from a practice that would continue on with them down through the ages as a marker of God’s faithful deliverance, a practice that centers on a little lamb. As we read, each family was to slaughter an unblemished lamb. And with the blood, wipe the doorposts and lintel of their home. **And here is a really important and often misread aspect to this story. The text says in verse 13: The blood shall be a sign**

for you, on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt.

The blood of the lamb is a sign FOR YOU that God is passing over. It wasn't that God needed to know which houses were ok to strike and which ones he needed to spare. The sign was for the Israelites, to help them remember. When the blood was placed upon the doorway, it represented for the Israelites that there was a promise given for them. The blood represents a life given for their salvation, not just protection for them, but a substitution of one life for another. You can hear the New Testament themes foreshadowed in this text, with Jesus as the Passover lamb.

The Passover for Israel was a touchstone that pointed them back to God. The Passover gave Israel an anchor of faith, something to remember when life was overwhelming.

This last Christmas, a movie by the name *Unbroken* was released. The film adaptation of the book by the same name by Laura Hillenbrand. It's the harrowing story of Louis Zamparini, the troubled child who discovered a love and gift for running, who after competing in the 1941 Olympics in Berlin, joins the military and, while in his first mission over the Pacific Ocean, has his plane shot down. If you've been around this church for a bit, you know that this is one of my favorite stories. Louis, along with a few others, were stranded on a raft in the middle of the Pacific Ocean for 41 days, surviving devastating sun, crippling dehydration, and shark attacks that came out of the water.

Louis was half his original weight when he and the others who remained were rescued by the Japanese, who then proceeded to torture them within a breath of their lives. Somehow, Louis miraculously was rescued. However, as we soon find out, his troubles were far from over. You see, when Louis Zamparini returned from his time interned in Japan, he quickly returned to normal life, getting married, having a child, but his demons followed him. Soon Louis was consumed with rage, bitterness, a desire to enact revenge on his captors, and an addiction to alcohol that alienated him from his loved ones.

Louis, turns out, wasn't free after all.

And in a last ditch effort to do something to help her husband, Louis' wife invited him to go with her to a small tent gathering, virtually unpublicized in LA, to hear a young preacher by the name of Billy Graham speak. As Louis heard the message of repentance and forgiveness available in Jesus Christ, he became agitated and stormed out of the tent. Now for some reason, Louis decided to come back the second night, and as Graham preached, Louis had a flashback, remembering a moment long buried under the weight of agony and torture, anger and humiliation. But Louis remembered a day sitting out in the intense sunlight over endless stretches of ocean. In that moment, his lips swollen with thirst, he remembered what he said on that raft. It was a prayer, a promise made out of the depths of his desperation: "God, if you save me, I will serve you forever."

When that flashback ended, Louie's life was changed. He felt supremely alive and he walked forward and surrendered his life to Jesus Christ. His past and his future, his enslavement and his anger were released by the God who rescued him.

The point of Passover, the image of the blood of the unblemished lamb, slain and given for Israel, marked on their doorway, was for remembering. It was a touchstone, a place of remembrance, an ongoing act of worship that would remind them of their salvation and prepare them for the road ahead.

Our Exodus

Exodus has a lot to teach us. Its stories are profoundly relevant to us today. Each of us knows what it is like to be held captive to one thing or another. It could be a unhealthy relationship or our feelings of anger or disappointment toward someone who has hurt you in the past. It could be an addiction or, as we know from stories like Louis', it could be literal enslavement.

God gives us this tangible story of Passover, one that is translated into our New Testament context through the Passover Meal hosted by our Lord, as a marker pointing to our rescue. Jesus gathered his followers around a table in a visible act of worship, precipitating his final journey to the cross. The deliverance that comes from the cross of Calvary is the symbol of ultimate salvation, Jesus' once and for all defeat of sin and death.

But, as Eugene Peterson suggested in the outset, our life of faith is not lived in general and by abstractions. God's great promises that we can't see take shape in things we can see: bread and wine, body and blood, given for your deliverance.

Living into new life takes time. It doesn't take root and bear fruit instantaneously. That's why we continue to come back to the table, to the Passover. Here is where our old life, one of captivity, slowly dies, and what grows is new creation, born of the Spirit. The Apostle Paul says Galatians, for **it is for freedom that you are set free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.** Our assurance of forgiveness today we spoke words from Romans 3, **they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith.**

You might be asking, so how did Phil and Joe do? For 90 days, they both fasted, having nothing but fresh vegetable juice. Joe lost 90 lbs and was off all of his meds by the end, and 450 pound Phil lost over 200 lbs and was entirely off all his medication. Every time they crammed those cucumbers, apples, spinach and carrots into that juicer, they were reminded of the journey they were on and in it saw their rescue.

The times in our lives when we feel trapped, unable to see a way out of the things that grips us – whether it's fear, anger, resentment or addiction – God invites you to come to the table in faith. It's here where we get a glimpse of God's game plan, we see God's full field of vision. And God's plan for you, as the prophet Jeremiah says, is one of welfare

and not evil, one that has a future and a hope if you receive it in faith and live into the freedom it brings. The way we move into that Promised Land is to keep this dream alive alive, because this sign is for you.