

**MOTIFS OF CRUCIFIXION:
THE PASSOVER AND EXODUS
Luke 2:1-7**

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Second Sunday of Epiphany, January 16, 2022, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. This is the first in a series entitled “Motifs of Crucifixion,” drawn heavily from a book written by Reverend Fleming Rutledge.¹

SCRIPTURES

Deuteronomy 26:1, 5-10

When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it and settle in it...you shall make this response before the Lord your God:

‘A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous.

‘When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labour on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression.

‘The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

‘So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me.’

You shall set it down before the Lord your God and bow down before the Lord your God.

Mark 14:12-16

On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed, [Jesus’] disciples said to him,

‘Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?’

So he sent two of his disciples, saying to them,

‘Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house,

¹ Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015).

“The Teacher asks, Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?”

He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there.’

So the disciples set out and went to the city, and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal...

While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said,

‘Take; this is my body.’

Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them,

‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.’

Introduction

This week I had a Zoom call with a friend of more than forty years, Dr. Ted Wardlaw, who is retiring after two decades of serving as President of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. From his perch as a seminary president, Ted has a broader vantage point from which to watch the shape of religion in America than I do serving one congregation of one faith in one location. I asked Ted what he thought churches should focus on as we come out of this two-year period of COVID. He said there is no formula and no consultants yet claiming to have one. Then he said: “I think in the Presbyterian Church, we need to bear down on serious preaching and teaching above all else.”

I could not agree more, which is perhaps why we have been friends for forty years. I have always believed in serious preaching and teaching – with doses of humor thrown in for good measure; and I have always appreciated you who form Westminster for the encouragement and support for such effort.

As you might imagine, there is nothing more serious in preaching than a focus on the crucifixion. The death of Christ on a cross – in all its shame and violence – is not the sales pitch, the tag line, the company slogan that would draw outsiders into the church out of curiosity or pleasure-seeking. Yet as we saw in four sermons this Fall:

- The crucifixion of Christ is *primary* to the Christian faith.
- In its heinousness, it seems *Godless*: “My God, my God: Why hast Thou forsaken me?”²

² Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34.

- It grows out of and exposes the depth of *human sin*
- And finally, we saw that the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ are God's way of coming from *outside* history *into* history to *redeem* every human creature and all of nature and the universe, to *rectify* what has gone wrong in the Fall, and to empower us who believe to live with joy and determination as we await the completion of that rectification in the glorious day of Christ's return.³

As serious as the crucifixion is, the death and resurrection of Christ is a matter *of* hope and *for* hope. It is *the* way in which God has triumphed over every *power* that seeks to hold us back and every *force* that seeks to destroy us, including the force the Apostle Paul calls "the last enemy to be destroyed"⁴ – death.

To convey this hope, each of the next eight sermons I preach will focus on a separate *motif* of crucifixion found in the Bible. Not a theory. Not an explanation. Not a symbol. But a motif. Each motif is interwoven with others. None of them stands alone. None conveys the full truth of the death and resurrection of Christ; but taken together, they provide us as *complete a picture* as our hearts and minds can absorb in this life, as complete a picture God has painted for our benefit here and now.

These eight motifs of crucifixion – in order – are:

- The Passover and Exodus
- The Blood Sacrifice
- Ransom and Redemption
- The Great Judgment
- The Victory of Christ
- The Descent into Hell
- The Substitution
- The Recapitulation.⁵

These are drawn the book entitled *Crucifixion* by Episcopal theologian and preacher Fleming Rutledge. I have provided suggested pages for reading each week; our Adult Formation Committee is planning a multi-week Sunday morning class in conjunction with the series. And I personally hope this focus on the crucifixion will *deepen* and *broaden* your faith, help you *discern* where God is active in the world and where you might join that action, and *lead* to one the richest celebrations of Easter you have known.

Let us pray: *Augustine said: "You...were deeper inside me than my deepest depths and higher than my greatest heights. Lord, we ask that from your depth and height you will enable me to speak a word that is heard, that edifies, that offers hope, and that challenges us to join you in in your work of redemption. Amen.*

³ These four bullets summarize the first part of Rutledge's book, "Part I: The Crucifixion," pages 1-206.

⁴ I Corinthians 15:26.

⁵ These topics encompass the Chapter in Part 2: "The Biblical Motifs," on pages 207-612.

The Crucifixion as Passover and Exodus

Many of us with any exposure to Christianity are vaguely aware that when Jesus rides into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, it is the beginning of the celebration of Passover.

- We may also recall that four days later when Jesus shares the Last Supper with his disciples, on which our Communion Service is modeled, the Passover setting is highlighted: (“On the night he was *betrayed*, Jesus took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to his disciples. ‘This is my body,’ he said, ‘given for you.’”)
- Thus, when he is betrayed, arrested, tried, convicted and sentenced to death by crucifixion, it is during the Jewish celebration of Passover.⁶

Now if you are like me, when we have Communion, even in the antiseptic way we are partaking now, our *individual* focus is often on the *forgiveness* of sins. “This cup is the new covenant, sealed in my blood, shed for the *forgiveness* of your sins.” As the elements are being passed, I often pray for forgiveness of my sins or for the power to forgive those against whom I am holding grudges. Through the Sacrament of Holy Communion, I seek *atonement* for my individual sins.⁷

But when Jesus rides into Jerusalem at the beginning of the Passover celebration, he is *not* entering a ritual aimed at helping people *atone* for their sin or guilt.⁸ Rather, he is arriving at the spiritual and political capital of Israel to celebrate Passover, the feast in which the Jewish people remember their *deliverance from slavery*.⁹ Thus when the Bible relates Jesus sharing his Last Supper as a Passover Meal, the Gospel writers are linking his *crucifixion* on the cross with the *deliverance* of the people of Israel from slavery. They are depicting his crucifixion as a *new Passover* and his soon to occur resurrection as a *new Exodus*.¹⁰ *It is more a matter of deliverance for all the people than atonement for individual Israelites.*

The death of Christ is thus the way God came from “*outside* the world” “*into* the world” not only to *forgive* sins, but more importantly for *this* sermon, to *deliver* us from *all that enslaves us*.¹¹

II.

I want to let you in on a little-known secret: Do you know what the *first way* was that the people of Israel *knew* God, *experienced* God, *remembered* God?

⁶ Rutledge 216-220.

⁷ Rutledge 216.

⁸ In Judaism, sin offerings are described in Leviticus 4 and Numbers 15; guilt offerings, in Leviticus 5-7.

⁹ This is instituted in Exodus 12, prior to crossing the Red Sea from slavery to freedom.

¹⁰ All four Gospels place the story of his death and resurrection within the Passover setting. They all emphasize two main themes: Rescue from death when the angel of death passed over the houses of the Israelites; and deliverance from slavery through the crossing of the Red Sea. See Exodus 14:10-15:1. In this motif of crucifixion, the blood is less an offering for sin as it is God’s ordained way of saving his people from death (I Corinthians 5:7-8). A few years later, the First Letter of Peter equates the Passover Lamb (1:19) with the suffering servant (2:21-25) in Isaiah 53, whom Christianity began to identify as Christ – “a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief” (53:3). See Rutledge 219-220.

¹¹ Rutledge 219.

- Was it the fact that God had *created* them: “In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth...”?¹²
- Was it the *call* to Abraham and Sarah: “I will make of you a great nation...”?¹³
- Was it the giving of the *Law* to Moses on Mt. Sinai: “You shall have no other gods before me...you shall not kill...you shall not steal”?¹⁴

It wasn’t any of these. The *first collective memory* the people of Israel had of God was *the God who delivered them from slavery in Egypt*. In their oldest creed, equivalent to our Apostles Creed, they recite:

When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us...we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression.

The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

Israel first knew God as *Deliverer*. They first knew God as *Liberator*, not as Creator or Nation-Builder or Lawgiver. Their first memory of God is *Deliverance*.

Just as the central action of God in Judaism is *delivering* the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt,¹⁵ the central action of God in the New Testament is the *death and resurrection* of Christ, by which we are *delivered* from all the powers of sin and death that rule our lives and rule our world. Jesus’ death is the *new Passover*; his resurrection is the *new Exodus*.

II.

I am deeply aware of the power of deliverance.

(a)

As I sit in front of my computer writing this sermon late Friday afternoon, I am texting with my 46-year-old son who is sending me the link to watch through livestream the Friday night worship at a non-denominational church in Florida in which he has been active for the past twelve months, a period in which, for the first time in his adult life, he has been *sober* for more than a few weeks at best.

¹² Genesis 1:1.

¹³ Genesis 12:1-4.

¹⁴ Exodus 20:1-17.

¹⁵ Exodus 14, followed by the Songs of Celebration in Exodus 15:1-21.

This time last year Martin was within probably a-tenth of a point on the blood-alcohol poisoning scale of losing his life, after spending most of the prior year in and out of treatment centers. As we are texting, we are awaiting the testimony that his “significant other” is giving about her own deliverance over the past three years, testimony similar to what Martin has given several times recently as he speaks to AA meetings, treatment centers, churches, and halfway houses.

For his adult life, I have been a *witness* and *bystander* to the tremendous power – which is nothing less than Satanic – which dominates his life and the lives of others addicted; and I have been a witness and bystander to the power *God* gives such persons to refuse to drink or ingest, “one day at a time.” Addiction is truly one of the “principalities and powers”¹⁶ from which the death and resurrection of Christ releases us, a label given them by the Apostle Paul, a principality and power some of you in these pews and on livestream know directly.

The Lord brought us out of [the land of addiction] with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

I am watching this deliverance in my son, praying that it lasts every day of his life.

(b)

But Passover deliverance is not just from *personal* demons. We have seen the power of deliverance *in our world*.

- Deliverance is why Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is such an important figure in our own nation and in its dominant religious heritage.
- Deliverance is why the world and its people who love freedom mourn the death of Bishop Desmond Tutu this past month.
- Deliverance is why we mourn the December 23rd removal of the Pillar of Shame Monument from the University of Hong Kong, commemorating lives lost in the uprising at Tiananmen Square in 1989. Who can forget the young man, standing in front of the tank? No attempt to remove that monument to freedom will erase our memory of the grainy video of the man standing up to the tank.¹⁷

Deliverance is why every time in our nation we come closer to “a new birth of freedom,” every time we take a new step in the never ending process of deliverance, every time we support others in our own nation and around the world seeking freedom, we are living *out* and living *into* two central events of our faith – Exodus and Crucifixion – *deliverance* from any power personal or political that holds us back, holds us in, holds us down.

¹⁶ Ephesians 6:12-13.

¹⁷ See <https://www.npr.org/2021/12/23/1067163101/hong-kong-university-removes-tiananmen-massacre-statue>.

That deliverance continues in what we are witnessing and involved in today, with its fits and starts, its strides and stumbles, its strategies constructive and strategies less so. It is God's movement of Exodus and Deliverance, Crucifixion and Resurrection.

When Civil Rights workers in our country were told with words or bayonets "to turn around and go home" they often broke into song:

Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around
Turn me around, turn me around
Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around
I'm gonna keep on a-walkin', keep on a-talkin'
Walkin' on to freedom land.¹⁸

Their faith was rooted in Passover and Exodus. It was rooted in Crucifixion and Resurrection. It was rooted in God's action of Deliverance in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It was rooted in hope and determination.

Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around.

Amen.

¹⁸ <https://genius.com/Mavis-staples-turn-me-around-lyrics>.