How Enemies Become Family

An Easter Meditation on Passover, Baptism, and the New Creation

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A Table for Enemies

My goal this morning is not to cover over anything that the songs and the readings have already presented us with, because that is the heart of the good news. Somehow God can take enemies and turn them into family. Somehow, by the application of his blood, we who were strangers become one blood. What an extraordinary story. And we have an opportunity to live into it.

Today is Easter Sunday. The Jews call it Passover. The church has called it Easter, the Lord's Supper, Communion: various names for this remembrance of the sacrifice the Lord made, and the way that sacrifice turned enemies into family. It is interesting that all of it is done around a table.

Some of us need to reinstitute a little of that. Many of our churches got started a long time ago by throwing off anything that smelled like rote ceremony: the Lord's Supper became routine, so we decided we would not do it routinely, and eventually we threw out every symbol the church had ever used. Then time goes by, and if you're not living the symbol either, what do you have? You have no symbol, and you have no life. The family God has brought us into has symbols worth living. Bread broken. A cup poured. Jesus said he was eager to eat this meal with

his disciples. He broke the bread: “This is My body, broken for you.” He poured out the wine and shared the cup: “This is My blood, shed for you. Do this in remembrance of Me.”

Reading Easter Through Exodus

Before there is the death of Jesus, there is a commemorative meal that has been kept for somewhere between twelve hundred and fifteen hundred years, going back to the first Hebrews coming out of Egypt. To understand what Jesus is doing at his table, you have to go back and understand the story Israel was living into. That story informs the life we are called to live.

It begins in Exodus 1, with Pharaoh getting nervous about the Hebrew slaves multiplying. He gives the order to throw all their newborn sons into the river. But the Hebrew women are bearing children faster than the system can kill them. One of those sons, Moses, escapes the infanticide. He is picked up by Pharaoh’s own daughter, brought into Pharaoh’s house, educated there, and, in a strange providence, nursed by his own mother.

Eighty years later, Moses is out in the desert, and a fiery bush burns without being consumed. The voice of God calls him out of that bush:

“So I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and large land, to a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus 3:8).

Then God says, “Go to Pharaoh; tell him to let My son go,” and he warns:

> Then you shall say to Pharaoh, “Thus says the Lord: Israel is My son, My firstborn. So I say to you, let My son go that he may serve Me. But if you refuse to let him go, indeed I will kill your son, your firstborn.” (Exodus 4:22–23)

That last line gives some people pause. “What kind of God kills the firstborn of Egypt?” Rewind a moment. Pharaoh’s people had been killing the firstborn sons of the Hebrews for

years. God says: if you will not let my people go, I will take your firstborn, not all your sons, only the firstborn. And he gives Pharaoh nine opportunities to repent before the tenth plague. Many Egyptians did repent. When Israel finally walked out, Exodus tells us a mixed multitude went with them. That is a powerful, gracious example of God holding back his anger. The firstborn of Egypt did die. But many were spared who should have been judged.

Who Got Wet?

Israel left Egypt and came to the Red Sea. Pharaoh changed his mind and pursued them. God opened the waters; Israel walked through on dry ground. Not a drop of water touched them. When their pursuers followed them down into the sea, the water came back over them and they perished.

That is a powerful story of salvation. When the taskmasters of life want to control you, when they have you under their power so completely that what is wrong has stopped registering as wrong on your conscience, when external or internal oppression has worn your conscience down, God still acts. Pharaoh and his men had no conscience left of what they were doing. They had not only enslaved Israel economically, they had moved on to infanticide so the slaves would have no power to rebel. That is the way of the world, internal or external: get the soul so weak it cannot withstand what is happening to it.

Israel rehearsed that deliverance year after year. Psalms 113 through 118, the Hallel psalms sung at Passover, are a remembrance of God's deliverance from Egypt. Psalm 118 cries:

> Open to me the gates of righteousness; I will go through them, and I will praise the Lord . . . The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone . . . Save now, I pray, O Lord; O Lord, I pray, send now prosperity. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! (Psalm 118:19, 22, 25–26)

Hold onto those words. They became indispensable to the New Testament writers as they began to retell God's plan.

A Voice in the Wilderness

Isaiah, or the school that gathered around him, picked up the same theme. Isaiah 40 begins with comfort:

"Comfort, yes, comfort My people! . . . The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God'" (Isaiah 40:1, 3).

God is coming through the wilderness back to be with his people. There is a homecoming. The Father wants to be with his children. He wants to break bread with them. He wants to dwell with them. Israel had been in exile: first under the Egyptians, then under the Babylonians. Different name, same taskmasters: Egypt, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome. By the time you reach Jesus' day, the names have changed, but the story has not.

Mark opens his Gospel by reaching back to that very promise. John the Baptist appears in the wilderness, and Mark cites Isaiah 40 and Malachi 3:

"'Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You.' 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make His paths straight.'" (Mark 1:2–3, citing Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3).

Malachi adds:

"And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple" (Malachi 3:1).

This is the homecoming of the Lord to his people. And in their minds, the pattern was clear; it was Exodus all over again. The King would come, the firstborn of Egypt would die, the

pursuers would drown, the wilderness would be crossed, and Israel would arrive at the Promised Land. Roman heads would roll the way Egyptian ones had.

But that is not the story the Gospels tell.

Behold, the Lamb

John the Baptist stood at the Jordan and baptized. What was he doing? He was staging a new exodus. People were going down into the water and coming up on the other side, as if to say: This is the boundary; the Promised Land begins here; the promises of God are about to be fulfilled.

Then Jesus walks down to those same waters. And John cries out:

"Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

Stop and feel the weight of that sentence. In Egypt, the symbol of deliverance was a slaughtered lamb whose blood went on the doorposts. The symbols of Pharaoh were power, domination, control, manipulation; those were the tools of Egypt. The symbol of God was a lamb. John points at Jesus and says: this man is going to be that lamb. And the scope of his sacrifice is universal: "the sin of the world," not the sin of one tribe.

Then comes the first great reversal. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, John tries to refuse: "I have need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?" But Jesus says, "Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." And he goes down into the water.

Notice the difference. When Israel went through the Red Sea, who got wet? The Egyptians. The pursuers. The enemies of God. The children of Israel walked through dry. But at the Jordan, who gets wet? Jesus. He goes down into the waters as if he were the enemy. He comes up, and is led into the wilderness for forty days, just as Israel went forty years. He is

tempted just as they were tempted. They murmured against God; he did not. Through every temptation he commits himself to a Father he knows will save.

That is the beginning of his ministry. The next three years are him trying to get Egypt out of his disciples. They are still thinking like Egyptians. The religious leaders of his day are still using Egypt's methods. It is striking how those methods reproduce themselves. Watch any kingdom overthrown by coup (the French Revolution, for example) and what the people did to the king and the queen and the court is exactly what they had accused the king and the queen and the court of doing to them. Oppression breeds oppression. The only way to break the cycle is sacrifice. That is what Jesus came to do. "Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you." He was coming at the whole thing from a totally different angle.

The Triumphal Entry That Wasn't

Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a colt, just as the prophets had said. Mark 11 tells it. The people lay down palm branches, and they sing, they sing the very psalm we just read:

"Hosanna! 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!' Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" (Mark 11:9–10).

Their expectation was high. Maybe this was the Passover when the Lord would suddenly come to his temple. Maybe this was the moment Psalm 118 had been pointing to all along. They expected a straight shot from the gate to the Roman guardhouse, then on to Pilate's house, maybe a stop by Herod's, on the way to building an army that would shake off the yoke of Rome.

Mark, in his deadpan way, lets the air out of the moment. Jesus comes into the temple, looks around, and, because it is late, goes back to Bethany. That's it. Imagine the crowd. They cried, "Save now!" and the King came in and went home for the night.

The next day he comes back, and something has been mulled over all night. He walks into the temple with what I can only call a controlled fury. He drives out the moneychangers and the merchants and quotes Isaiah 56 and Jeremiah 7:

"Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it a 'den of thieves'" (Mark 11:17, citing Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11).

"A den of thieves": brigands, men who beat and maim and destroy while they're stealing from you. Notice what Jesus does there. Instead of issuing judgment on Rome, this so-called wannabe king turns and rebukes Israel's own religious leaders. Mark then says:

"And the scribes and chief priests heard it and sought how they might destroy Him" (Mark 11:18).

Stop and ask the question. Who is Pharaoh now? Who now wants to destroy the firstborn of Israel? It's the religious leaders. The very people God called to be his representatives of righteousness and justice in the earth. What a warning that is for all of us. Do not let yourself become so assured that they are the problem out there and you have it all together.

"Enough of That"

This last week of Jesus' life is one long argument. He is debating, struggling, wrestling with the religious leaders, trying to find a way to navigate their thinking. And he is still trying to get Egypt out of his own disciples.

Peter, especially, keeps missing it. We see it the night Judas betrays him. The servant of the high priest steps forward, Peter pulls his sword, and let's be honest, Peter wasn't aiming for an ear. He was going to split Malchus right down the middle. Malchus must have flinched at the last second; all Peter caught was the ear. Jesus says, "Enough of that," picks up the ear, puts it back on the head of the man who has come to drag him to a kangaroo court, and says:

"Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Matthew 26:52).

Peter still doesn't get it. The other disciples don't get it. The religious leaders don't get it. They are all still thinking in Egyptian terms. But Jesus is unsettling all of that. He is talking about a new kingdom, a kingdom whose target is no longer just Israel. The target of this kingdom is a Lamb who is sacrificed for all. "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." The blood of Jesus is the blood that makes us all one blood and brings us back into community with the Father.

The Vineyard and the Heir

The day before he is killed, Jesus tells the religious leaders a parable. They know the story already, because it is a recapitulation of Isaiah 5. A man plants a vineyard, builds a tower in it, the temple, and lets it out to tenants. When harvest comes, he sends his servants, and the tenants beat them and turn them away. Finally the master says:

> "I will send my beloved son. Probably they will respect him when they see him." But when the vinedressers saw him, they reasoned among themselves, saying, "This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, that the inheritance may be ours." (Luke 20:13–14)

Jealousy. That's what's at work in those religious leaders. Jesus then asks what the lord of the vineyard will do. They answer the question themselves: He will destroy those wicked men miserably. So now they have spoken their own indictment.

And what does Jesus do at the end of his Passover? He is betrayed and hung on a cross. Is he hurling the curse back at them? "I'm coming back, I'm going to raise this city to the ground, your firstborn will die"? No. From the cross, he says:

> "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34).

He turns to the thief beside him and brings him into paradise. Pilate had given the crowd a choice between Jesus and Barabbas. Barabbas was a brigand, a rebel, actually doing the very thing Israel had been expecting Messiah to do for a thousand years. The irony is staggering: Barabbas runs free, and the true King of the Jews (that is the indictment over his cross, in three languages) dies offering forgiveness for his killers.

And when he breathes his last, as the sun darkens over the earth, the Roman soldier at the foot of the cross is the one who confesses:

"Truly this Man was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:39).

We Were the Egyptians

Listen, the world has been an enemy of God. Every one of us has lived as Egyptians, as Babylonians, as Romans. Nobody has escaped enemy status. It isn't as though you and I were on the fringe of righteousness and an easy half-step put us in the kingdom. We were not on the fringe of righteousness. We were in darkness. We were captivated by the kingdom of darkness. Paul says it bluntly:

> And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience. (Ephesians 2:1–2)

Once we recognize who we were by nature, Egyptians, we get a clearer picture of what was actually done for us. Look at Romans 5:

> But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God

> through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. (Romans 5:8–10)

Look at who we were and what Christ did. Christ went down into the waters. Christ got wet. Not the enemies: Christ. He went down like the Egyptian soldiers in the Red Sea. But when he came up out of those waters, a death had taken place, and a dove came and descended on him. The Spirit of God dwelled on him.

He was like the first dry ground after the flood, the first sprig of life out of the chaos of creation. Genesis 1 says the Spirit of God hovered over the face of the deep. Jesus comes up out of the chaotic waters, and the Spirit of God hovers over him as a dove. He is new creation. He is the New Jerusalem. He is the new temple. He is the stone the builders rejected, become the chief cornerstone.

Baptized Into His Death

Romans 6 then asks the obvious question:

> What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:1–4)

We follow Christ. We take up our cross. We go down into the waters of baptism, and we come up wet, like the Egyptians we were. But when we come up, we have been restored to newness of life. The tables have turned. It is no longer the death of God's enemies; it is the death of God himself, and the extension of his resurrection life to all of us.

Mary in the Garden

Today is the day of resurrection. The life that he came up out of the Jordan bearing; that is what he brings out of the empty tomb. John 20 tells the story. Mary comes to the tomb, the very Mary out of whom seven demons had been cast. She is so in love with the Lord that she shows up first. She mistakes him for the gardener and asks where he has taken the body.

Now look at what's happening. We have a man and a woman and a man in a garden. When was the last time we saw a man and a woman in a garden? But this time something has changed. This is new creation. He calls her by name, "Mary," and she recognizes him and goes to cling to him. He says:

"Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, 'I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God'" (John 20:17).

The first apostle of Jesus Christ is Mary Magdalene. She is the first one sent with the message of the resurrection, sent to the very men who would be sent into all the world to preach the gospel to every creature. What a powerful change. What a resurrected life.

Swords Into Plowshares

How is the kingdom of God established in the world? With sword and spear? No. The promise of the prophets, Isaiah 2 and Micah, was always that:

"They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore" (Isaiah 2:4).

The war machine becomes a machine for harvest, for bounty, for feeding the family. Zechariah 9, in the very passage about the king coming to Jerusalem on a colt, says the same thing:

> Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and having salvation, lowly and riding on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey. I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the horse from Jerusalem; the battle bow shall be cut off. He shall speak peace to the nations. (Zechariah 9:9–10)

When you came to an altar of confession, whether at the front of a church, or sitting in your car beside a lake thinking, “My God, I am forsaken; I am lost; I am beyond the pale of recovery,” somehow God began to take all the warring of your soul and beat it into instruments of harvest. You become an agent of God to bring life into this world: not to kill your enemies, but to cause your enemies to fall at the feet of Jesus as Lord and Christ.

“Sin is not going to reign over our members,” Paul says in Romans 6. The days of the Egyptians and the Assyrians and the Babylonians and the Persians and the Greeks and the Romans are over for us. Micah 7 says:

“You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea” (Micah 7:19).

It is no longer people who die for our deliverance from sin. It is our sins that get thrown into the sea.

Paul says it again from a different angle:

“For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds” (2 Corinthians 10:4).

Whatever was working in any of us, whatever principality and power had its hooks in our spirit, got crushed under the foot of Jesus. His weapon was the two-edged sword that came out of his mouth. It is the words of Jesus that bring life. He said it himself:

“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life” (John 6:63).

Between the Times

Let that new warfare, the news that God turns enemies into family, be the work we are about. He invites us to a table full of bread and wine. That is what we have come into contact with when we have come into contact with Jesus. We are a new family.

And he is coming back again. Between his first coming and his return, what is the mandate of the church? To continue in the well-doing he has called us to. To live the life of Christ in us. To be the new temple, the new Jerusalem, new creation in a world that is decaying. People need that kind of hope.

Let’s go be that kind of people.