

**“Reclaiming the Symbols of Lent: The Passover Meal”**

**A sermon for University Congregational Church**

**March 31, 2019**

**Rev. Paul Ellis Jackson**

Traditional Word

The Festival of Unleavened Bread

3 Moses said to the people, “Remember this day on which you came out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, because the Lord brought you out from there by strength of hand; no leavened bread shall be eaten. 4 Today, in the month of Abib, you are going out. 5 When the Lord brings you into the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, which he swore to your ancestors to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey, you shall keep this observance in this month. 6 Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a festival to the Lord. 7 Unleavened bread shall be eaten for seven days; no leavened bread shall be seen in your possession, and no leaven shall be seen among you in all your territory. 8 You shall tell your child on that day, ‘It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.’ 9 It shall serve for you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead, so that the teaching of the Lord may be on your lips; for with a strong hand the Lord brought you out of Egypt. 10 You shall keep this ordinance at its proper time from year to year.—Exodus 13:3-10

Contemporary Word

“and when we speak we are afraid  
our words will not be heard  
nor welcomed  
but when we are silent  
we are still afraid  
So it is better to speak  
remembering  
we were never meant to survive” — Audre Lorde

“Live life when you have it. Life is a splendid gift-there is nothing small about it.” --  
Florence Nightingale

“This will be our reply to violence: to make music more intensely, more beautifully, more devotedly than ever before.” — Leonard Bernstein

“Reclaiming the Symbols of Lent: The Passover Meal”

PAGE ONE

On July 20, 1969, I was playing outside of our home in Derby when my parents made all of us kids stop what we were doing and come gather around the television. It was a hot, humid day—one of those days in my memory that stands out because of what we were to witness in just a moment. My dad was particularly excited, I'd never seen him quite so anxious about something on T.V. I'd heard him yell at a newscaster and he had this very funny thing he'd do where we'd turn down the volume and he would add the voices to the sitcom or movie or whatever was showing on the screen—he was pretty talented at this and had a very quick wit—but today there would be none of that. There on the grainy black and white television screen was an image of what looked to me like a gray rocky ledge. And on it was this mechanical contraption. It was, of course, the Lunar Lander, and it was just moments before Neil Armstrong would step foot out of the lander and become the first human on the face of the moon.

Many of us remember this moment and most of us know the iconic pictures of this event. But what many don't know is what happened right after. Buzz Aldrin shared the following story a few years ago--He and Armstrong had only been on the lunar surface for a few minutes when Aldrin made the following public statement: "This is the LM pilot. I'd like to take this opportunity to ask every person listening in,

whoever and wherever they may be, to pause for a moment and contemplate the events of the past few hours and to give thanks in his or her own way."

He then ended radio communication and there, on the silent surface of the moon, 250,000 miles from home, he read a verse from the Gospel of John, and he took communion. Here is his own account of what happened: "In the radio blackout, I opened the little plastic packages which contained the bread and the wine. I poured the wine into the chalice our church had given me. In the one-sixth gravity of the moon, the wine slowly curled and gracefully came up the side of the cup.

Then I read the Scripture, 'I am the vine, you are the branches. Whosoever abides in me will bring forth much fruit. Apart from me you can do nothing.'

I ate the tiny Host and swallowed the wine. I gave thanks for the intelligence and spirit that had brought two young pilots to the Sea of Tranquility. It was interesting for me to think: the very first liquid ever poured on the moon, and the very first food eaten there, were the communion elements.

Humans had traveled through the immense dark and empty space and put themselves on the surface of our moon. They willingly placed themselves on top of hundreds of thousands of pounds of liquid oxygen and kerosene. They knew the incredible risk they were taking and they still did it. They had what we call the "Right Stuff". And they beat the odds and landed on the moon. And what did they do right after telling us they had arrived safely? They celebrated this feat with the simple meal of remembrance and thanksgiving that all Christians know—Holy Communion.

What is this strange and wonderful thing we do really about? How did Christians come to use the symbols of the Jewish festival of Passover to represent their remembrance of Jesus? How did this simple act take on such power in so many human lives? Good questions....so, let's start with the Jewish festival...the Passover meal or the Seder.

## PAGE TWO

The holiday of Passover celebrates the Exodus from Egypt – when the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were liberated from slavery, and became a new and unique nation under God. Most of us know this story through the annual presentation of Cecil B. DeMille's "The Ten Commandments" and I won't go through the entire story right now, just remember that God visited many plagues upon a Pharaoh who refused to set God's people free—the Hebrew People—the Jews. His irrational hatred of the Jewish people (which has consumed so many and threatens to rise again, even in this country) –this hatred led Pharaoh to commit many hideous acts. And the God of the Hebrew People acted against him.

The Passover Haggadah declares this to be a recurring pattern: "For not merely one rose upon us to destroy us. Rather, in every generation they rise over us to destroy us, and the Holy One, Blessed be He, saves us from their hands." The ancient Egyptians, Babylonians, Greeks and Romans, the Crusaders and the Inquisitors, the Cossacks and the Nazis – their empires are gone, their cultures in disrepute.

As for the Jews – fifty days after leaving Egypt, they were camped at the foot of Mount Sinai, where they experienced a Divine Revelation and accepted upon

themselves a unique mission and code of conduct. This is what has preserved the Jewish people through the ages. This is all recorded in the book of Exodus and I put the relevant passage regarding the commandment to observe Passover in your bulletins. Basically it commands the Jewish nation to celebrate and remember the events of the Passover at an annual feast. The term Passover is derived from when the “Hand of God” passed-over the Jews who had smeared lamb’s blood on their doorways to protect their household during one of the plagues visited upon Pharaoh. What happened next, though, in the story of Jesus and his ministry, is a little more complicated. Through an act of betrayal, (Judas’), and at a simple Seder supper (for recall that the events of Holy Week take place during this Passover festival celebration) --Jesus was at a small gathering of his disciples and they broke bread together. The early Christian church then sort of borrowed the Seder to make it into a Christian practice—a way to remember Jesus, the ritual we call communion—which countless Christians through the centuries have used as a way to not only remember Jesus and his teachings, but to bind them to the entire Christian community. When we partake of communion, we are creating a unity of purpose—an ideal—that Jesus’ teachings of love of God and love of neighbor will not be lost—will not be forgotten.

PAGE THREE

I think sometimes that we get so caught up in the rhythm of our lives, the habit of our daily activities that we forget what a miracle it is for us to be here. And what a gift we have been given. Our lives are amazingly rich gifts filled with opportunity and

purpose. Now I know that not everyone sees life this way, but I always have.

Florence Nightingale reminds of us this when she says: “Live life when you have it.

Life is a splendid gift—there is nothing small about it.” And we need to remember it.

Remember it and celebrate it. I think our shared meals (and even those times when we eat alone) can be great celebrations—celebrations of getting through the day, sometimes—sometimes that is enough. Celebrations of the joy of living.

Celebrations of all that we are thankful for. When this church feeds Wichita’s homeless, we celebrate. We were able to prepare and serve them a meal. Just a few nights ago this congregation fed some folks—and they were so glad. And we should celebrate that. When the food was being brought into the church last week in anticipation of Friday night’s meal, someone (Anne McCoy) saw the meatloaf that Galen Minks had made and commented saying: “Dang. Galen always has a better way to do things! He cut his meatloaf into squares rather than slices.” However the meal was prepared, it was done so out of love and given out of great love for our neighbors.

PAGE FOUR

When Jesus knew that his life and ministry were coming to an end, he chose what most of us would choose. He wanted the comfort of a meal and the company of his friends. So, during the celebration of Passover, he gathered his disciples and they shared one last meal together. I think of all of the revolutionaries in history, those people who have resisted the influence and hegemony of Empire and the status quo—those who have looked around and seen great inequality and great injustice—

and they said “no more”. They knew there was a better way to live and they went about teaching this to anyone who would listen. The Buddha did this, Jesus did this, Muhammad did this, Mother Teresa did this, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King did this and there are new saints among us right now doing this—when you make a meal for a homeless family, you are saying—no more! When you spend your Saturday morning working at our Hygiene Pantry, you are saying “No more!” When you assist our friends at Gammon Elementary you are not only saying “no more” but you’re actually doing something about it—you’re listening, you’re helping, you’re feeding and you’re making space for every human being you encounter. And when we go to Central America and we work with our partners on the ground in this poor, fragile country, we are all saying “No Mas!” “No More”! We love the world and we love humanity and we are going to do all we can to make their lives better and their faith stronger. And we do this by fostering healthy, strong relationships with everyone we encounter—from the check-out clerk at Dillon’s to the intimate moments with our partners—we foster and create strong and healthy and loving relationships.

Healthy relationships begin at the table. Healthy conversations—ways to be in community, both in your family, in your church and in the great Wichita area—it all begins at your dining table. We make healthy habits in how we share our thoughts and our dreams together. We learn how to make space for those in our lives who need their voice to be heard. We make space for those we disagree with. And we break bread together and eat and drink and laugh. I’d recommend everyone visit the website [familydinnerproject.org](http://familydinnerproject.org) for ideas on how to strengthen the bonds that are being built at your table.

One of my New Testament professors (and probably Robin's most important influence in regards to all things communion) had some very useful ideas regarding shared meals. Dennis Smith always said "If I have eaten a meal with you, we are friends." Sharing a meal creates a sacred bond between humans.

Even eating alone can have an intentionality of community. Pause before your meal and contemplate what you are about to do—yes, we're performing a basic human requirement for life, and yes, often times we rush through it—we grab a sandwich or something through a drive-thru and rush to our next thing. I'm just a guilty of the next person at rushing through my life and grabbing food and eating on the go! But I also know that in those sacred moments when Duane and I have made a meal, and we sit down at our dining room table and we look at each other and acknowledge that we are extremely lucky men. We know and we are grateful. We have so much, in a world where some many have so little. When I have just returned from a country that is suffering mightily under an oppressive government, to be able to sit with my Nicaraguan friends and eat together, we knew what a gift it was and that it can easily be taken from us. But in those holy times of remembrance, we celebrated being together. We celebrated crossing the great divide that separates—whether it's the Gulf of Mexico—the vastness of space—or the gap that exists between you and me because of past hurts and disagreements—we made it—we're sitting together in community and we are about to share a meal. That's worthy of celebration! That deserves praise!

Audre Lorde reminds of this survival celebration in one of her poems:



“and when we speak we are afraid

our words will not be heard

nor welcomed

but when we are silent

we are still afraid

So it is better to speak

remembering

we were never meant to survive”

We are one sacred community—all of humanity—the family of life, gathered together in love to celebrate and to remember. May we always remember the love that got us this far! May we always be grateful for our lives—our families-our friends—our church—and our community. Let us remember and celebrate!Amen

### **Resources Used**

[www.inspire21.com/stories/truthstories/CommunionontheMoon](http://www.inspire21.com/stories/truthstories/CommunionontheMoon)

[www.Familydinnerproject.org](http://www.Familydinnerproject.org)

All Scripture is from the New Revised Standard Version of the Holy Bible