

## “The Importance of Ritual”

*A Sermon Written by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver  
for First Congregational Church of Lebanon  
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### Exodus 12:1-14

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: <sup>2</sup>This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. <sup>3</sup>Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. <sup>4</sup>If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. <sup>5</sup>Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. <sup>6</sup>You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. <sup>7</sup>They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. <sup>8</sup>They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. <sup>9</sup>Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. <sup>10</sup>You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. <sup>11</sup>This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the LORD. <sup>12</sup>For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. <sup>13</sup>The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

<sup>14</sup>This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

If you watch baseball, you’ll notice that many batters follow their own special routine each time they come to up to bat. Some tug at the sweatbands on their right wrist, then the one on their left. They tap the bat on home plate or maybe their cleats.

Twice.

They step out of the batter’s box.

Twice.

Finally, they’re ready to hit.

Interestingly, they will do this each time they step to the plate, as if it were part of the rules of baseball. It’s not. It’s just one of the many little rituals that help define our national pastime.

We derive comfort, we derive meaning from rituals. Some are contrived to help us replace things that were lost. There was a story in last Sunday's *Times* about "divinity consultants" who are trying to inject meaning into a suddenly unmoored work environment through intentional routines, or rituals. This is a new thing—but it draws on something very, very old.

Have you ever given any thought to the importance of rituals in your life? Where did they come from? What do they mean? Why do you do them? All of us engage in rituals, large and small.

Some of us might look at the headlines in the paper or watch a morning news program while drinking coffee or tea before we begin our days. Others might follow certain prescribed routines on holidays, like decorating our homes or church for Christmas in a particular way, at a set time. And then there's the aforementioned baseball ritual.

Let me tell you about a ritual I follow every week when I'm leading worship. I get up around 6:00, take out our dog, and feed him breakfast. Then I clean up, go down to the kitchen, and make some coffee, before I leave to pick up the newspaper, usually the *New York Times* but sometimes also the *Valley News*. Then I head over to the church. Once there, I look at the front page and the op-ed section while I drink my coffee, and then I get ready for worship, all with plenty of time to spare before the start of the service. When we gathered in person, that was especially important, because inevitably something would need my attention before worship. Now, things are a bit different on Sunday, when I'm all alone in the building, but still I like to avoid leaving things to the last minute in case a call comes in at, say, 9:40, which has happened. Either way, a comfortable ritual helps me get ready for worship. It grounds me, and that's especially important in unsettled times like these in which we live.

Now, you'll notice there is nothing explicitly sacred about my routine. But it gets me ready for sacred time, which has elements of ritual about it. Think about the worship in which we engage every week: it, too, follows a pattern, has familiar elements, some identical from week to week, and is fairly constant throughout the year.

Ritual plays a particularly significant role in religious observance. Some rituals are more important than others, and this is because of what they represent—or the meaning with which they are invested. Think again of our worship. We have a weekly liturgy, but we also have something we do monthly: we celebrate the Lord's Supper, which is one of our two sacraments, the other being baptism, which is celebrated when needed. It, too, of course is a ritual.

With each sacrament, we are recalling an event; we are re-enacting a central moment in the history of our faith. But while we remember the past, we are also affirming a promise that has yet to be fulfilled. The ritual is not just a memorial, it is a promissory note. A great example of this past-future dynamic is found in today's reading.

If you take a look at the first chapters of Exodus, you'll notice that they contain a pretty rapid narrative that covers a lot of territory. Israel is enslaved; the people are groaning under the weight of Pharaoh's demands; Moses comes onto the scene, quickly grows up, and goes from being a prince to a fugitive and then a divine spokesman. He is charged with delivering word of God's judgment to Egypt's king, and then nine plagues are inflicted upon the Egyptians. Pharaoh refuses to cede ground because, as Scripture tells us, his "heart had been hardened." Then the tenth plague looms, and we the audience await the dreadful things that are about to unfold.

Which is when Exodus takes a detour, describing in great detail the ritual that the Hebrews are to follow in commemorating their deliverance from bondage. What gives? The short answer is that the Bible was assembled by different editors or redactors, and the ones we know as "P" or the "Priestly" editors inserted this relevant bit of instructions into the story. Of course, that doesn't tell us why. Why was this ritual so important that it had to be preserved? What might we learn from this? And what does any of this have to do with us today?

Let me posit that when something odd like this occurs in Scripture, it's not because of sloppy editing but because somebody really wanted us to notice something. It's impossible not to be stopped cold in our tracks by this charge. This, we are told, is how we will remember the Passover. And our children will do likewise and their children and so on, for all time. This was a big deal, in many ways the biggest in the Hebrew calendar. A new year would begin with this festival. The act of remembrance was less a ritual than a piece of performance art, complete with stage directions.

The Hebrews, and then the Jews, saw the Exodus as a defining—no, *the* defining moment in their story. This is when the descendants of the patriarchs, these outsiders, this rag-tag band of nobodies, became a people.

It has always struck me as remarkable that the Hebrews and then the Jews identified with slaves, the lowest of the low in society's pecking order. They did not forget from whence they came. They did not try to "pretty up" their origin story. Instead, they seized on this and made it the core of their identity, remembering their beginnings through both story and ritual.

Ritual is in many ways performative art. By doing and not just telling, the event becomes that much more vivid. And so, at the annual Passover feast, people are to eat and dress in a way that will remind them of the fateful night on which the God of Israel delivered punishment to his enemies. And the retribution felt by the Egyptians was harsh, with death coming to every firstborn in the land.

It's interesting that the Hebrews were commanded to paint their door lintels so the Angel of Death would know to pass over their homes. One would have thought such a being

would simply know which houses to skip. And weren't the Hebrews living in Goshen, apart from the Egyptians? Shouldn't they simply have been out the way? Clearly, if we dwell on questions like these, we are missing the forest for the trees. By giving his people something to do, God has elevated Israel from a passive stance and made them actors in their own deliverance. No, they were not the authors of their own salvation, but they needed to do something if it was to be real, if God's actions were not to be in vain.

We are reminded in the Passover meal that freedom does not come easily, that sin will be punished, that no man or woman is better than another. All of this is can be inferred from the ritual; all of this is considered to be vitally important for the people to remember. When the priestly redactors included this ritual in Exodus, it was their way of communicating how much they valued this self-awareness on the part of Israel. As history has unfolded, this ritual has been performed, and it has been handed down from generation to generation, right until the present day.

This isn't a simple ritual; there is much preparation involved, and it takes a couple of hours to properly move through the Passover seder. That is part of what imparts such gravitas to the meal, to the act of memory. It isn't something that one rushes through, not by any measure. One takes time, one pays attention.

Now, things have changed regarding the Passover meal. For starters, there's no longer a sacrifice. And there's been innovation, too: there's no description in Exodus of the seder dinner, with its famous four questions or the tradition of an empty place for Elijah at the table, should he show up. Tradition has evolved over time; it's the ritual's intent that has remained the same.

Earlier, I mentioned that this particular ritual recalled a past event but offered a promise for the future. We see that in the modern ritual with that place-setting for Elijah—he lived long after the time of the Exodus after all, but he was integrated into the story, the harbinger of Israel's future redemption.

This idea of redemption is central to Israel's story. There was a strongly held belief that God would not abandon his people. That has held true, though at times it has been questioned, as the people experienced and contended with pogroms and anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. Many Jews have believed that the founding of the modern state of Israel was God at work, offering a modern form of redemption, a new start to his people. And as that state has prospered and grown strong, the message of Scripture, the message of Passover has always held true: you were once slaves, nobodies, and it was God who set you free. Remember where you come from; remember those who suffer now, as you did then—and don't become Pharaoh.

So, what does any of this have to do with us today? Conveniently, providentially, this lesson from Exodus falls on a communion Sunday for us. Later in our service we will

engage in the ritual of the Lord's Supper. Like the Passover meal, it is performative. We will not only recall but reenact Jesus' actions at that "Last Supper."

And just as we saw a deeper meaning in the Passover meal, we see that in communion, too. While there's a spectrum of belief among Christians about what happens at the Table, at the very least we should all believe that remembering this particular meal—of all the meals that Jesus shared with others—is important and has meaning. I believe that communion is a statement of who we are and who we are meant to be: one people, joined together in Jesus, who love one another and care for one another, regardless of where we come from. As I've noted before, we have an open table at First Congregational Church. The meal we share is not ours; it is the Lord's, and thus it's not for us to determine who is eligible to approach the table and share the elements. We merely facilitate the breaking of the bread and the drinking of the juice.

We've been celebrating communion in a different way since the coronavirus descended upon us in March. Though we do not gather physically in one place, I do hope you still feel a common bond with one another, a belonging that is part of what we do together.

There's something else about communion and Exodus that is worth noting. The early Church believed that Jesus, like Moses, was bringing us to a new place, the difference being that while Moses led the Israelites to a new land, Jesus frees us from the power of death. That, of course, is something worth remembering, through story and word. It's the kind of thing that warrants a ritual, one that is central to our worship and our own sense of who we are.

My hope is that when we share the Lord's Supper, we will never see communion as a liturgical component that needs to be endured, or something that needlessly prolongs our worship. My hope is that we will see it as an affirming act in which we celebrate the fellowship of Jesus, the community into which we have been called by our God—the one who redeemed Israel and, we believe, will redeem us, and who through his Spirit continues to comfort and sustain all of his children, here in Lebanon, New Hampshire, and throughout the whole world.