

**Bethel AME Church**

**4/12/20**

**Insights from the Rabbis**

### **Passover and Easter**

This week, as we celebrate Easter, the most important feast for Christians, Jews are also celebrating their most important feast, Passover. Passover and Easter usually fall close to one another, as they do in the New Testament. The crucifixion takes place at Passover time, which Jesus and his disciples are in Jerusalem to celebrate (Matt. 26:17-18; Mark 14:12-16; Luke 22:7; John 13:1). Often overlooked is the fact that Jesus regularly went to Jerusalem for Passover (John 2:13), one of the three pilgrimage feasts where Jews who were able were supposed to travel to the Holy City (the other two are *Sukkot*/Booths and *Shavuot*/Pentecost). Jesus learned this practice from his parents, who made the 3-5 day trek from Nazareth to Jerusalem every year for Passover (Luke 2:41).

Paul says Christ is our Passover sacrifice and invites us to keep the feast of unleavened bread (1 Cor. 5:7), although there is some question as to whether the Last Supper was actually a Passover meal. In John, the supper with the footwashing occurs the night before Passover actually begins, which historically makes more sense because it is doubtful that the Jewish leaders would have been involved in the arrest and trial of Jesus once the feast had begun (see John 18:28). At that supper, which we reenact in our communion service, Jesus offers his disciples the bread and wine (but not the Passover lamb!) as signs of a new covenant through his death. So the NT draws very close parallels between the events leading up to Easter and Passover.

In Judaism, Passover is a week-long celebration of freedom and hope that recalls God's astonishing act of redemption over 3,000 years ago, liberating an insignificant group of immigrants from enslavement to the most powerful empire on earth (see Exodus 12). This was the beginning of the Jewish people as a nation, and Passover is a celebration both of what God has done for them and a prayerful anticipation of what God will yet do for them. The telling of the story begins with the declaration: "Now we are here; next year in the land of Israel. Now— slaves; next year we shall be free." And the seder closes with the exclamation, "Next year in Jerusalem!" which expresses the age-long hope that those who have been scattered around the world will be reunited in the Holy Land. That hope will only be fully realized with the coming of the messiah.

Although the Passover festival lasts a week, the central event is a dinner on the first night of that week which is called a "seder," in which the Exodus story is retold and remembered in Scripture, song, and prayers, as well as some special rituals that are part of the meal. Although the dinner is a deeply religious event, it does not take place in a synagogue but in the home, and is led by the head of household, not a clergy person. And it is a full meal with real food, not simply a bite of fake bread and thimbleful of fake wine.

Some of the food at a seder is symbolic, although still part of the meal. Matzah is unleavened bread that recalls the haste in which the Israelites had to leave Egypt. In preparation for Passover, Jews are supposed to rid their houses of all leaven, a kind of

symbolic “spring cleaning,” and are only to eat unleavened bread for the seven days (ex. 12:18-19). My best friend growing up was Jewish, but from a non-observant family that did not keep kosher or attend synagogue regularly. But every year at Passover he would come to school with sandwiches made of matzah.

Other symbolic foods, usually put together on a special plate, are

bitter herbs, a reminder of the bitterness of their slavery (Ex. 12:8);

*charoset*, a mixture of nuts, raisins, and sweet wine, symbolizing the mortar they used to make bricks;

an egg, recalling other festive offerings during Passover;

parsley (or celery) dipped in salt water, a reminder of Israelite tears in Egypt;

the shank bone of a lamb to recall the Passover sacrifice in the Temple.

In addition, the meal revolves around four cups of wine, each recalling one aspect of God’s promised salvation: “I will bring you out...I will deliver you...I will redeem you...I will take you to be my people” (Ex. 6:6-7). A lot of scholarly ink has been spilled trying to figure out which of these cups Jesus is referring to in the Last Supper, but they all are part of one idea: thankfulness for God’s redemption of his people.

The seder is more than simply a remembrance of long-ago events. The Passover service declares: “In every generation each one must see himself as if he had personally come out of Egypt. It was not only our ancestors whom the Holy One redeemed; He redeemed us too along with them.” Sharing the symbolic foods provides a tangible sense of participation in those events. It says, “We were there and this is who we are. Our identity as members of the covenant community is formed by our personal experience both of suffering and oppression as well as God’s gracious liberation.”

Interestingly, the seder tells the story with a particular focus on teaching the children present. The Bible commands the Israelites to pass on an understanding of the Exodus, and of Torah more generally, to future generations. “In days to come, when your children ask you, ‘What does this mean?’ say to them ‘With a mighty hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt (Ex. 13:14; see also Ex. 10:2; 12:25-27; 13:8; Deut. 4:9; 6:20-25). The seder is actually structured around children. It begins with the youngest child asking, “Why is this night different from all other nights?” It goes on to speak of four different types of children responding to the story. It contains a treasure hunt game for a special piece of hidden matzah with a reward for the child who finds it. And it ends with children’s songs. The seder is a family gathering in the home to teach and celebrate the heart of what it means to be a Jew.

Rabbi Sacks argues that the faithful observance of Passover throughout history has been what united the Jewish people and maintained their identity as a people despite their being scattered all over the world and despite humanity doing its best to eradicate them. The great miracle of the survival of the Jewish people for over 3,000 years is due in no small part to their regulars celebration of Passover.

As Christians, we must also sadly recognize that Passover historically has been a time of heightened danger for Jews. From early on, Passover and Holy Week became a time for Christians to revile and demonize Jews for killing Jesus. Spurred on by anti-Semitic Holy Week liturgies and passion plays, Christians would attack and slaughter Jews in the name of their risen Lord. And Passover also was the occasion for the rise of the blood libel,

widespread accusations that Jews kidnapped and murdered Christian children, sometimes by crucifixion, using their blood as a remedy for illness and even incorporating it into the Passover matzah. Such accusations have continued into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and have led to riots and mass destruction of Jewish communities. Jesus surely must be weeping at the fact that the celebration of God's love and redemption became the occasion for hatred and murder of his people. That history has made it extremely difficult for Jews to accept the gospel as credible or desirable.

The seder ends with a strange children's song called "One Little Kid," that narrates a series of acts of violence in the world. But the final verse, the closing words of the seder, affirms that God will come and destroy the Angel of Death. The Angel of Death had inflicted the final plague on Egypt, allowing the Israelites to escape, but Judaism holds on to the hope that death will not always plague us. The apostle Paul also affirms that death, the final enemy, will ultimately be destroyed because of the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:26). As pastor said in his sermon this morning, the Easter message is that "death does not have the final word." That Easter message, that Passover message, is one we need in these difficult times.