

Sermon
September 10, 2017
Based on Exodus 12:1-14
Rev. Dr. Kevin Orr

This morning, I'm continuing this series of sermons that reflect on how creation and the cycle of life teach us about God and our relationship with God and all of creation. The subject for today's talk is not what we often like to talk about or even think about. But it is central to the cycle of life. It is something that we will all experience. I am talking about death. It is a powerful reality that we all have to deal with, no matter how much we try to avoid it. Our challenge is to claim the reality of death and redeem it from the grips of fear and denial. We need to embrace death as a part of life and a means to freedom. Death need not be our enemy. But death absolutely demands our respect.

In his hymn to the creation, St. Francis wrote:

Be praised, my Lord, through our sister Bodily Death,
from whose embrace no living person can escape.
Woe to those who die in mortal sin!
Happy those she finds doing Your most holy will.
The second death can do no harm to them.

The Passover, which we heard of in the scripture reading this morning, is full of death, as well as life and freedom. That's three of the most powerful aspects of human experience. No wonder that Passover is central to the Jewish faith. Moses was told to begin the calendar fourteen days before the actual day of Passover. Assuming that first day of the month is a new moon, then the fourteenth day, when the Passover took place, would be a full moon, the brightest night of the month. For the Israelites, this night marked the day of their liberation from slavery among the Egyptians and the beginning of their journey to the promised land God would give them.

You can see how it is not much of a stretch to see how Christians have their own version of Passover. The death and resurrection of Jesus

sets us free from the slavery of sin and death. Easter, the Christian Passover, is the day we celebrate as the beginning of the journey to the promised land of heaven. Both Passover and Easter are about freedom. For Passover it is freedom from slavery. For Easter it is freedom from what St. Francis called the second death. That is, the death that comes from sin.

But think about how much death is experienced around the Passover. You could go back to when Moses was born, a time when the Pharaoh had ordered all the Hebrew boys to be killed. Moses's mother used stealth by placing Moses in a wicker basket and setting it in the reeds near where Pharaoh's daughter came out, hoping Moses would be spotted and be spared. And we know the rest of the story. But what a heartless command, to kill male infants. It adds to the oppression and abuse heaped upon the Israelites under chattel slavery. Then, we have each household of the Israelites taking a one year old lamb, among the sheep or the goats, and in the evening, just after sundown, all those lambs are slaughtered about the same time, a wave of death all at once. The blood of the slain lamb is then rubbed on the doorframe of the house so that the angel of death that God unleashes will pass over that house in its search to kill the firstborn of each household among the Egyptians, not just the firstborn among the humans but also the firstborn among the animals. It is a wave of death that is beyond our comprehension. I don't know about you, but when I imagine what that wave of death must have been like is nothing short of frightening.

There is something about death that we have to fight. In a way, death is our enemy. We are driven to resist it. But death also has the power to inspire actions that preserve life. There's not much else more effective in getting someone's attention than the threat of death. When Pharaoh ordered that the Hebrew boys be killed, the midwives revolted. They would not follow the orders of Pharaoh. And when Pharaoh called in the midwives to explain why the Hebrew boys were still alive, they said the Hebrew women keep giving birth before the midwives could get there. In the face of an unjust and cruel policy of human extermination, the midwives creatively resisted, frustrating the powers that be.

Those lambs were sacrificed. But their blood was effective in preventing death from visiting each home upon which the blood was smeared on the frames of the front doors. The sacrifice of those lambs saved lives. And then when the death of all those firstborn in every household occurred, that was the final straw. That very night, the people of Egypt begged the Israelites to leave right away, lest all of Egypt be wiped out. All that death made it clear to Egypt that Israel's God was much more powerful than their gods. There was no need for negotiation. Egypt declared unconditional surrender, setting the Israelites free from their bondage. So yes, death can be a powerful motivator to do whatever it takes to preserve life.

So what about today? How does death push us to do whatever it takes to preserve life? It was the killing of unarmed black people and the perceived lack of accountability for the police that killed them which launched the Black Lives Matter movement. It is a movement that demands that the lives of black people matter. This movement has drawn in hundreds of thousands of people of all shades to commit to the struggle of equal treatment under the law, the dismantling of white supremacy, the overcoming of racism that continues to plague our land. It is the deaths of all these people that demand a response, like those midwives of long ago, to undermine policies that tend to harm people of color so that every person can thrive.

Our attention turns to the heightening tensions on the Korean peninsula. Everything is trying to be done in order to avoid mass death. South Korea has massive amounts of bombs targeting the North and the North to the South. The North continues to push development of the capacity to send nuclear bombs to Seattle, Los Angeles, maybe even New York and Washington, D.C. What if we preemptively strike North Korea? Will China and Russia stand down or will they launch missiles at us in retaliation? But if we don't preemptively strike, what if North Korea drops a nuclear warhead on Los Angeles? What if North Korea sells nuclear weapons to terror networks? The whole thing has death weighing heavily, not only over Korea, but over the world. Mutually Assured Destruction is supposed to prevent all out nuclear war. The fear of mass death is supposed to prevent the nuclear annihilation of the

planet. We must hope that this fear of mass death will be a sufficient motivation to find ways to de-escalate the tension on the Korean peninsula.

Then there are the hurricanes: Harvey, Irma, and perhaps José. The threat of death has served as a powerful motivator to save human life. We have heard so many stories, watched on our screens, how so many people have responded in heroic ways to get people to safety from their flooded homes in South Texas. We have heard the governor of the state of Florida consistently repeat, “We can rebuild your home, but we cannot rebuild your life.” He has hammered home the need for people to evacuate away from the threat zones. Thousands of volunteers have been activated to assist in sheltering evacuees. And as soon as the storm passes, first responders will be out again, going through the neighborhoods, checking on who may need saved. Everything possible is done so that death is prevented, so that life is preserved. When death is a real threat, we find ourselves driven to do what we can to face down death. A strong spirit of unity, of community, of sacrificing so that others may be saved, all of this emerges. Death has the power to do that. Death has the power to remind us of what matters most, what is of greatest value, which is life itself.

So this is what haunts me about the Passover that we heard about this morning. The question that bothers me is how could the Passover have been prevented? Why did it have to be that the situation apparently called for God to send a plague that killed the firstborn of families and animals? Of course, if Egypt had not enslaved the Israelites, if the Pharaoh had not ordered the killing of Israel’s children, if Pharaoh would have let the Israelites go after a few of those nasty plagues that God did through Moses, then the mass death of the Egyptians would not have occurred. But he didn’t let the people go. Not until the mass death. And even then, he changed his mind and chased the Israelites into the wilderness, where his soldiers were swept away by the waters of the Red Sea. There was so much death that could have been avoided.

The Passover story is a powerful story. It gives followers of the Jewish faith a story that allows them to annually remember and celebrate how God acted to deliver them from slavery in Egypt. It is a story that

demonstrates the power of God. For Christians it helps us understand who Jesus is for us, the lamb that was slain so that we might be set free from the power of sin and death. But the Passover also is a cautionary tale. It is a warning that God cares about injustice, abuse, and oppression. I certainly don't believe that God sends plagues that kill the firstborn of every household. But I do believe that God doesn't sit back and watch what goes on in the world, shaking God's head at it all and wishing things got better. No, God is invested in what goes on in our world. God is always active, responding to what goes on in the world, influencing people to act in ways that are loving, that tend toward life. So, for me, the Passover story, drenched with death, asks the challenging question: what will I do to prevent and dismantle oppression? How will I respond to the injustices that occur around me?

When people take to the streets to declare that their lives matter, it is a way to challenge death and protect life. When people do whatever it takes to prevent war from breaking out, it is a way to challenge death and protect life. When people are being threatened with death in the face of hurricanes, and people take action in response, it is a way to challenge death and protect life. And all of these responses are guided by God, whose servant is death, and who is the source of life.

In his verse to sister bodily death, St. Francis wrote, "Happy those she finds doing Your most holy will. The second death can do no harm to them." We can't avoid the first death. But we can do something about the second death. We can live our lives in ways that enhance life. We can live our lives in ways that align with God's will. And God's will is that we have life, and that more abundantly. That abundant life doesn't happen by magic. It takes effort. It takes cooperation with God's influence on our lives. It takes matching our words with our deeds. Sometimes it requires doing things that are uncomfortable, taking risks, even making sacrifices. So let us not fear death. Instead, let us confront death, and redeem its power, so that when death threatens to show up, we respond in ways that bring forth life.