

**Altavista Presbyterian Church
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“God’s Precept”
Exodus 12:1-6
Exodus 12:7-13**

**Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 10, 2017**

Exodus 12:1-6

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, “This month shall be for you the beginning of months. It shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month every man shall take a lamb according to their fathers’ houses, a lamb for a household. And if the household is too small for a lamb, then he and his nearest neighbor shall take according to the number of persons; according to what each can eat you shall make your count for the lamb. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male a year old. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats, and you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs at twilight.”

Exodus 12:7-13

“Then 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. They shall eat the flesh that night, roasted on the fire; with unleavened bread and bitter herbs they shall eat it. Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted, its head with its legs and its inner parts. And you shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. In this manner you shall eat it: with your belt fastened, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. And you shall eat it in haste. It is the Lord’s Passover. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. The blood shall be a sign for you, on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt.”

“God’s Precept”

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Today we continue in our lectionary miniseries from the Book of Exodus. Last week we took a look at the story of the Burning Bush. We learned that God has a way of appearing to us in the ordinary, routine things of life. We also learned that any excuses we may bring against God’s call are but wind when compared to the glorious reality of God’s eternal presence with us. Next week we’ll take a look at the familiar story the Parting of the Red Sea. For today, however, we heard read the institution of the Passover. This story, like many others, was taught to us throughout our Sunday School years. I invite you to join me as we dive into the this powerful story.

The institution of the Passover is such an integral aspect of Jewish worship and so rich with symbolism and prophecy for the Christian that very often we forget the Passover is intimately tied to the Ten Plagues. If you remember from your Sunday School days, the Ten Plagues were sent against Egypt by God through the Prophet Moses. God delivered these plagues against Egypt because he hardened Pharaoh’s heart against the liberation of the Israelites. In order to understand the Passover, we need to understand God’s sovereignty and God’s grace. God’s grace

must be seen in light of his sovereignty and his position as judge. In this twelfth chapter of Exodus, we have an awful picture of the tenth plague. The Lord moving over the land claiming the firstborn of both man and beast, but passing over those houses marked with the blood of the Passover lamb. It is critical that we remember not to presume upon God's grace. Too often we get the notion that God is obliged to love us. Now, God does love us, in fact, that is God's most identifying characteristic. However, we are far afield in our thinking when we limit God to some perceived obligation of love, little though we deserve it.

It follows then that since we have sinned, we need to keep in mind that God is not obliged to show us favor. The Apostle Paul reminds the church in Rome that the potter has all the right over the clay to form it into whatever vessel he pleases. We deserve only justice, and for us that means certain condemnation. God does not owe it to anyone to stop justice from taking its course. God is not obliged to pity and pardon. If God does show grace, it is an act done of his own free will. Nobody forces God's hand. Therefore, we must see God's gracious mercy in the context of his being sovereign judge. Grace is free in the sense that you and I don't originate or deserve it. However, we need to always remember that this grace comes from God who is free to be gracious or not as he chooses. This is the context in which we are to understand the Tenth Plague and the Passover.

We see this view of God's grace when we see the Lord, in the form of the Angel of Death, sweeping hither and yon across the land. When he sees the blood of the lamb spread on the door frame, the Lord passes over that house and the household is saved. We see God's grace ultimately and radically in a frail man, hanging from an ugly cross, every drop of blood shed for the forgiveness of our sins. God tells Moses, in verse thirteen, that the blood shall be a sign. Three things are present in this precept: protection, cleansing, and substitution.

The Hebrew word at the end of 12:11, which for us is translated Passover, is the word *pescah*. The root of this word closely resembles an Egyptian word that means "to spread the wings over" or "to protect." This alters our view of the Passover event when seen in that light. It's not just that God passed by the houses with the blood. Rather, the imagery is that of God standing guard over the houses marked by blood, and in effect sending away or dissuading Death from entering that house. Isn't that a powerful image? God's grace protects us from the condemnation of sin and death. We surely see how Christ takes that role upon himself, that through his death and resurrection, we are afforded a level of eternal protection against the devil and death itself.

The second action present is that of cleansing. One of God's precepts to Moses is to have unleavened bread as part of the meal. In fact, the Passover is also known as the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Today, if I were to make bread from scratch, I'd start by buying yeast at the grocery store. In Bible times, this was not the case. The leavening agent was not yeast sperm but leftover dough, or sourdough, that was mixed with the new batch and allowed the proof. When used in allegory, leaven changes the composition of the unleavened dough, just like sin, when introduced into the human race, changes the relationship into a completely different composition. Now this is not a far-fetched analogy. Both Jesus and Paul make reference to leaven in this way when our Lord warns against the leaven of the Pharisees and the Apostle admonishes the Corinthians to remove the old leaven that corrupts the whole church. There is cleansing, a removal of leaven, because in Exodus 11:7, God tells Moses, "the Lord makes a distinction

between Egypt and Israel.” This is important to remember, but usually something hard to accept. The Lord certainly welcomes us as we are, as sinful and broken people. Remember, Jesus, like a good physician, comes to heal the sick and not the well. But, too often, churches and preachers teach that it’s okay to not only remain in sin, but to lift it up and praise it as a good. However, we see Scripture teaches that God makes a distinction between those who are cleansed by the blood and those who are not. When we encounter God, when we are touched by his grace, we are transformed. No longer do we conform to the ways of sin but are now conformed to Christ himself. This is the distinction God makes and is central to our understanding of the atonement.

For the Israelites at Passover, they had the blood of the slain lamb to cleanse and protect them. Today, the Congregation has the blood of Jesus Christ, shed on the cross, to cleanse once and for all. It is only when we are cleansed from what is abominable to God’s holiness and sovereignty, that we can really be one with Christ and with one another. As long as we continue indulging in sin, there can be no true communion. Neighbor will continue to lash out at neighbor. The poor and outcast will remain unwelcome. God’s creation will never cease from denying him. As the Apostle John teaches in I John 1:7, the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin, thereby we can walk in the light, as he is in the light, and we have fellowship with one another. We are cleansed by the blood of Christ, which means we are able to share, in union with our neighbors, in communion with our Lord. Another interesting, yet important thing to note, is God’s command to use hyssop to apply the blood of the lamb to the door frame. Hyssop was a small, bushy plant often used in purification rituals. One of the most dramatic uses of hyssop is in King David’s agonizing cry in Psalm 51:7, “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean.” Here, hyssop is associated with the cleansing of sin, and certainly that became the primary meaning of blood sacrifice in Old Testament law, and it is at the heart of Christ’s atoning work in our own lives.

The third and final act present in God’s precept is that of substitution. Throughout both the Old and New Testaments, the lamb is the clearest representation of Christ. John, in Revelation 13:8 calls Jesus “the lamb that was slain from the foundation of the world.” In John 1:29, John the Baptist calls Christ “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” According to the Apostle Paul, the Passover in the Book of Exodus was a type, a shadow of the great substance, our Lord Jesus Christ. Israel was saved by a lamb, the best and most perfect of its kind. The lamb was slain, and its blood was applied to their houses. Entering through the blood-covered doors, protected by the blood of the lamb, they then feasted on the lamb which had been slain for them. In the course of human events, it became perfectly clear that no sacrifice offered by man was adequate. For that reason, God had to provide something else, something altogether different. He had to provide the perfect Lamb without blemish, God’s only Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus had to be this lamb because only a perfect sacrifice could satisfy the requirements of God, who himself is perfectly righteous. Through faith we hold that Christ died for us, and had he not died, eternal damnation would be our lot. He paid our debt, died in our stead, was a substitution for our punishment. And we, the Christian, remember and celebrate that sacrifice whenever we eat of the bread and drink from the cup.

I hope you have seen this morning why the Passover is such an important event in Israel’s history, and why it should be very important in the understanding of our own faith. God’s charge to remember and honor the Passover is intimately tied to his protecting, cleansing, and

substituting on behalf of his children. Through the blood of the slain lamb, God the protector passes over the believer's threshold, enters the house, and prevents the destroyer from coming in to destroy the residents who have faithfully put the seal of the blood on their doors. Here it is possible to see the destroyer of the firstborn, not as God, but some other power whom the Lord commands yet opposes, and from whom he protects the Israelites. We can see how the feast of the Passover becomes a festival to celebrate the visiting and redeeming God, the One who comes to dwell among his people, not only as protector, but as sustainer and giver of life.

Let us pray. O Holy One of Israel, you delivered your people from a great and terrible plague. You brought them out from under the yoke of slavery when you passed through the land of Egypt. Holy God, you provide for us the true and perfect pascal lamb. This Lamb was slain for our sins and his blood protects us. United with him in baptism, we ask that you cleanse us with that blood. Make us faithful disciples who do your will. It is in Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.