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Exodus 12:29-51

Sixteenth Message

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BORN IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT

SERIES: A THEOLOGY OF WORSHIP

This time of year is especially meaningful for my wife Emily and me, since it marks the season when four of our five children were born. Because it is so miraculous a time, childbirth has a way of bringing a lot of emotions to the surface. Yet it also places one right on the edge of trauma, because the birth process is anything but safe. Any number of life-threatening complications can arise, not to mention the sheer agony of labor, so that no one breathes easily until that first healthy cry of a son or daughter is heard. The emotions experienced at birth are perhaps the most intense that a couple will ever experience. Yet I wonder if such emotions can even approach what God felt when he gave birth to his people Israel. Today we arrive at the climactic moment when, after nine intense labor pains, God gives birth to his people. A nation is born in a day! With a father's pride, God exclaims, "Israel is My son, My firstborn" (Exod 4:22).

Our text this morning, Exodus 12:29-51, reads like a birth announcement. First, we are invited into the delivery room. The atmosphere is one of extreme urgency to get this baby out of the womb "in haste." Then we are told the time of delivery (midnight), and we hear a great cry. We learn the sex of the baby (it's a son!). A spontaneous baby shower follows, where the newborn is lavished with gifts. Then comes the first baby portrait, and we look for family resemblances and characteristics that will shape the future of the child. And finally there is the christening or dedication of the baby.

Birth narratives are extremely important to nations, families and individuals. They are rehearsed at every birthday as a family's most treasured memories. If we do not know our birthright, we wander aimlessly, without roots or secure identity. The story of Israel's birth is even more significant since it gives shape to our birth narrative in Christ, and tells us who we are and what is undeniably ours as our birthright.

I. The Birth of the Nation (12:29-36)

A. Born At Midnight (12:29-32)

Now it came about at midnight that the LORD struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of cattle. Pharaoh arose in the night, he and all his servants and all the Egyptians, and there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was no home where there was not someone dead. Then he called for Moses and Aaron at night and said, "Rise up, get out from among my people, both you and the sons of Israel; and go, worship the Lord, as you have said. Take both your flocks and your herds, as you have said, and go, and bless me also." (12:29-32 NASB)

Israel's birth narrative begins at midnight, in the heart of darkness, when the dreaded destroyer invades every home in Egypt. The comprehensive horror is expressed in the fourfold mention of the "firstborn" that "pounds at the listener."¹ No one is exempt, whether king or slave; even the cattle are affected. The response of the Egyptians

comes as predicted. It is a great cry, reminiscent of the anguished cry of Israel (2:23-24; 3:7) under Pharaoh's cruel oppression. But this time the powerless are the protected and the oppressors are the victims. Imagine the impact this unspeakable cry had upon the Israelites as they were forced to contemplate the infinite price of their freedom. A grieving parent was heard in every Egyptian home. There is hardly a more gut-wrenching expression of sorrow than that of parents over the death of their firstborn.

As that cry rings throughout Egypt, Pharaoh finally capitulates. He cannot wait until morning. With extreme urgency he summons Moses while it is still night. Brueggemann captures the significance of the moment: "The four imperatives he speaks are the ones Pharaoh has most resisted, which he now desperately wants to utter: 'arise,' 'go out,' 'go,' 'serve.' The words are finally on Pharaoh's lips, but the command has been instigated by Yahweh. They are words of release, departure, permission, and complete capitulation."² Almost as an afterthought, with the most extreme irony, Pharaoh asks Moses to bless him. The king of Egypt gives public confession as to the identity of the true King and his representatives. This event was earlier anticipated by Jacob when he first arrived in Egypt (Gen 47:7-12) and blessed Pharaoh (Gen 47:7, 10). Jacob, who possessed nothing, blessed the one who had everything with the one possession he did not have, life itself.³

This may explain one of the purposes behind God's seemingly painful delays in executing justice for his people. Perhaps, as in the case of the Exodus, God is mysteriously orchestrating history in such a way that as he decimates the world's idols, he is eliciting confessions from all quarters that he alone is Lord. He seems insistent that these confessions be spoken with conviction; and the greater the delay, the greater is the conviction. Throughout scripture we find similar confessions coming from the most unlikely places. Centuries later, David will suffer for years in a dreaded wilderness. Yet, in the text of 1 Samuel, the narrator carefully demonstrates how everyone in Saul's kingdom, Saul's daughter, his son, the women, the people, even Saul himself (1 Sam 24:20; 26:25), eventually confesses that David is the true king, before he is publicly crowned before the nation. It was this same confidence that gave Paul the assurance to say that "every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:11).

The Egyptian population goes even further than confession, offering significant tribute to the Israelites. This was quite a baby shower!

B. Born To Plunder (12:33-36)

The Egyptians urged the people, to send them out of the land in haste, for they said, "We will all be dead." So the people took their dough before it was leavened, with their kneading bowls bound up in the clothes on their shoulders.

Now the sons of Israel had done according to the word of Moses, for they had requested from the Egyptians articles of silver and articles of gold, and clothing; and the LORD had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have their request. Thus they plundered the Egyptians. (12:33-36)

Everything goes according to plan. The Israelites leave, carrying not only their kneading bowls but also, as God granted them favor with the people, they are lavished with the wealth of the Egyptians. Israel was enslaved by a culture based on the accumulation of wealth and power for the few. Now Israel is given free rein in the shopping malls, and the former slaves leave Egypt decked out like royalty. Later, these riches will be used to build the tabernacle, so that God's first dwelling will be built with the spoils of victory over Pharaoh. The Israelites were to learn right at the outset of their history that they were born to plunder their enemies. By following Yahweh, worldly security would never be an issue for them.

The same could be said for the church. The apostles and the early church looked feeble and ill equipped to make even a dent in the materialistic world run by powerful Rome. The early church consisted mostly of slaves. The majority of those who made up the church had little money and very little influence. Yet Paul explains that because of Christ's victory, believers are equipped with the spoils of war, which the apostle describes as our spiritual gifts:

**"Therefore it says,
When He ascended on high,
He led captive a host of captives,
And He gave gifts to men."** (Eph 4:8)

With these divinely powerful gifts we are able to build God's new temple, bringing the light of salvation around the world. That is why, when Peter encountered the lame man, he said, "I do not possess silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you: In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene—walk!" (Acts 3:6). The world may glory in its gold, but the day always comes when the gold fails and we find "kings" at our doors, beseeching us for life. Two thousand years later the glory of Rome lies in ashes, while the glory of Christ's church marches on.

II. The Initial Portrait of the Nation (12:37-39)

Now the sons of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, aside from children. A mixed multitude also went up with them, along with flocks and herds, a very large number of livestock. They baked the dough which they had brought out of Egypt into cakes of unleavened bread. For it had not become leavened, since they were driven out of Egypt and could not delay, nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves. (12:37-39)

These three verses give the first portrait of the nation, one that is very revealing of Israel's destiny. First, we see God's new sons journeying past their former "labor" camp, Rameses. That great storehouse city with all its hated memories of hardship and humiliation now becomes the gateway to the Exodus and freedom. We can almost hear the resounding cry of "Freedom!" as they exit the city, much as when we sing our national anthem at sporting events and we hear an emotional cry with the climactic line, "the land of the free." Yet in Christ we possess an even greater freedom. In Christ we are free from the tyranny of sin, the world and the devil.

Secondly, we see that in contrast to the frantic Egyptians, this mass of oppressed slaves is abruptly transformed into an orderly

military troop "on their way rejoicing," with their heads held high. The term for men is not the usual word for man, *ish*, but rather, *gibbor* ("strong man" or "mighty man"), a word that is often used of warriors in battle. Its usage here suggests a subduing strength that vanquishes its foe. We too must realize that, having been liberated by Christ, we are called to a battle and are divinely equipped for the fight (Eph 6:10-20). In this war there will be no peace terms with the enemy. Passivity in the fray is not permissible for the Christian.

The third characteristic of this portrait of Israel is the sheer number of troops, 600,000. Many scholars question the literal interpretation of this extraordinarily large number, which would make the total population of the Exodus something like 2.5 million. To overcome the difficulty, some scholars interpret the Hebrew term *'eleph* (a thousand) as a "clan," which would make 600 family units more manageable. Others interpret it as a theological statement linking the Israelites of the Exodus with "all Israel," since the number represents the approximate population at the time of David and Solomon.⁴ Regardless of how one interprets it, the narrator is clearly demonstrating the fact that, despite Pharaoh's efforts to decimate this people, the Israelites have multiplied and prospered, just as God had promised. No human force no matter how powerful can thwart God's promise to bless. As the prophets of Israel contemplated the arrival of the Messianic age and a New Covenant, they were given visions of an even greater spiritual fertility that would bring unspeakable joy:

**"Shout for joy, O barren one, you who have borne no child;
Break forth into joyful shouting and cry aloud, you who have
not travailed;
For the sons of the desolate one will be more numerous
Than the sons of the married woman," says the Lord. (Isa 54:1)**

The "desolate one" is a term used of the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah 52:14. Jesus was this Servant, and though he never married, Isaiah predicted, "He will see his seed" (53:10). Here in 54:1 he explains just how fertile his seed will be. We find this vibrant life breaking out all through the book of Acts. No matter what vile attack the evil one brought against the church, even death itself, Luke recorded that the church "continued to grow" (Acts 4:29-35; 5:12-14, 42; 6:7; 9:31; 12:24). In Christ, this is your birthright. You are destined for spiritual fertility that springs forth out of your "barrenness."

The fourth characteristic of these "sons" is their makeup. We note that the narrator describes them as "a mixed multitude." This is highly significant. Right at the outset of her birth, Israel learns that faith, more than blood, is the hallmark of this community. Much more than blood, what unified this nation was more their socio-economic status of being oppressed by a cruel regime, much as the generation that was oppressed by the Nazis. Hitler sought to oppress not just the Jews, but also the handicapped and the elderly—all the marginalized of society. This characteristic will open the door to anyone outside of Israel being welcomed in if they will entertain their own brokenness, like Ruth the Moabitess. With the coming of our Messiah the door of opportunity has been flung wide open and gentiles of every race have come flooding into the kingdom. In light of this portrait it should feel blasphemous to us if we entertain even an ounce of nationalism in our blood.

The fifth characteristic of this people is that they are not only rich in number but in livestock. Pharaoh was unable to keep his best stock from falling into the hands of the Israelites. This furthers the theme begun in the Garden of Eden, that life is a banqueting table,

and that generosity should be the hallmark of God's people. What do we have that we have not been given?

And sixth, perhaps the most important characteristic of this newborn nation is the attention given to their diet of Matzoth, unleavened bread. Janzen sees this moment in the Exodus story as the turning point, when Israel makes an absolute break with her past. He writes,

To eat unleavened bread is undoubtedly also a sign of a new beginning. Leaven is a portion of a previously prepared batch of dough left to ferment, so that it can be used in a new batch of dough as the fermenting agent that will make the dough rise. Thus it becomes a symbol of carrying the past over into the future. To start a new batch of dough without leaven, by contrast, symbolizes a new beginning.⁵

Any new mother will attest to how vital diet is to her newborn. Many expectant mothers make radical changes in their eating habits during pregnancy so that nothing harmful or impure from their "old life" is carried over into the next generation.

If that is the case, shouldn't we care about what we feed our souls? As Peter writes, "like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation" (1 Pet 2:2). The word of God is the only unadulterated food that feeds the soul in purity. Jesus warned his disciples that in order to remain pure they needed to "Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Matt 16:6). Luke explains that the leaven of the Pharisees was "hypocrisy" (Luke 12:1), pretending to be what we are not. Hypocrisy can spread like wildfire. It puffs up and corrupts; it destroys honesty in relationships and obscures reality.⁶ The leaven of the Sadducees was of a different sort, but it was equally as deadly. It was a disbelief in the supernatural. Their scholarly minds could not embrace anything that had to do with the supernatural. Whether it was the existence of angels or a belief in the resurrection, they explained all the miraculous in the Bible through natural causes. If you have to have everything explained rationally before you can believe, you are succumbing to a dangerous leaven that spoils the mysterious beauty and holiness of our feast.

Paul further expands the theme of purity in the Passover feast from the teaching we feed on to the character we live by. In Corinthians he exhorts us as God's children of the New Covenant, "Celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity [purity] and truth [faithfulness]" (1 Cor 5:8). Norman Theiss writes,

This is a wordplay in Aramaic, where the word *petir* means both unleavened bread and purity... This was like saying, "Let us keep the feast of pure bread with a community pure in faithfulness"... Paul's use of the proverb, "a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough" in 1 Cor 5:6 (Gal 5:9) makes the unleavened bread the symbol of the Passover community. In the next verse Paul demands that the incestuous man be removed from the community, just as leaven must be removed from the house where Passover is kept.⁷

Each time we gather to partake of the bread and wine we do not come as a people free from sin, for we eat and drink to be cleansed of sin. But we must come with a renewed commitment to purify ourselves from sin, and choose not to tolerate it. If we cannot make that commitment we should not eat, for the hallmark of our new identity is purity, both in our teaching and in our character.

This portrait of the newborn son captures the essential characteristics that will forever mark the future of this family tree. This family

will be characterized by freedom, strength, fertility, hospitality, generosity and purity, all made available by the grace of God.

Now we come to the "dedication" of the son, where the rites of birth are memorialized for every generation.

III. Born to Worship (12:40-51)

A. Imitating the Lord In "Watching" (12:40-42)

Now the time that the sons of Israel lived in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years. And at the end of four hundred and thirty years, to the very day, all the hosts of the LORD went out from the land of Egypt. It is a night to be observed for the LORD for having brought them out from the land of Egypt; this night is for the LORD, to be observed by all the sons of Israel throughout their generations. (12:40-42)

The NIV has a better reading of the last verse:

Because the LORD kept vigil that night to bring them out of Egypt, on this night all the Israelites are to keep vigil to honor the Lord for the generations to come. (12:42)

The darkest of nights is followed by the brightest of days and is therefore eternally etched into Israel's national memory. This was the day when all Yahweh's "hosts" (or "companies," a military term) left the land of Egypt. Their night of departure is to be remembered as the night the Lord kept vigil ("a military watch"). Like a faithful military officer, the Lord did not leave his watch all night, but remained alert and attentive to all Israel's needs until each and every one had made his escape to safety. This was a night in Israel when everyone, without exception, experienced the presence of the Lord exceedingly real and near. In memory of that faithful "watching," Israel is to imitate what God did. She is to keep a night vigil, a watchful remembering of when a holy God remembered her.

This essentially defines what worship is and why it is so fulfilling. At its core, worship is imitating God (in word or deed). Whenever we do that we become most human. In like manner, retelling the stories of our conversion can be some of the most holy memories of when the Lord was exceedingly real and near to us. These events should be kept alive from generation to generation.

B. Imitating the Lord In "Inviting" (12:43-49)

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "This is the ordinance of the Passover: no foreigner is to eat of it; but every man's slave purchased with money, after you have circumcised him, then he may eat of it. A sojourner or a hired servant shall not eat of it. It is to be eaten in a single house; you are not to bring forth any of the flesh outside of the house, nor are you to break any bone of it. All the congregation of Israel are to celebrate this. But if a stranger sojourns with you, and celebrates the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near to celebrate it; and he shall be like a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person may eat of it. The same law shall apply to the native as to the stranger who sojourns among you." (12:43-49)

One of the tensions that arises with any banquet invitation list is how inclusive should the guest list be. Here Israel is given very precise rules to protect the sanctity and memory of the Passover. Israel has no say concerning who is "in" and who is "out." The boundaries of the guest list are determined by God; there is to be no deviation. Simply stated, all are welcome to the party, but everyone has to come in by the front door. No one is allowed to slip in the back entrance

unnoticed. Observe that there are no moral requirements to entry. It doesn't matter what you did in the past, or where you come from (your nationality). All that is required is a willingness to allow the reality of this feast to define your life. In Israel's day, all who wanted to come under the benefits of the blood of the lamb had to submit to the knife of circumcision (males at least). By this act of faith any foreigner or slave could identify with the people of God who left sin and the world behind through the blood of the Passover lamb.

This was one of the most difficult lessons for Israel to learn. Her tendency, like ours is, was to be too lenient on herself and too strict on outsiders. By the time Jesus came to Israel, the original vision of this feast was so blurred that Israel missed the glory of the New Passover altogether and with it the New Exodus. In a similar vein, Paul wrote to the Corinthian church that because the rich had shut the poor out of the communion feast and used it as an opportunity to indulge their sensual appetites, many in the church had fallen sick, and others had even died (1 Cor 11:30). If God's people would not preserve the sanctity of the "table," he would be forced to take action. By God's grace we are to be a mirror of God's welcome, inviting all to this table, while at the same time refusing to compromise his holiness. There is but one doorway to enter the feast. The invitation is open to those who desire their lives to be defined by the cross of Christ.

The text ends with a wondrous vision of Israel's obedience to the God who had redeemed her.

Then all the sons of Israel did so; they did just as the LORD had commanded Moses and Aaron. And on that same day the LORD brought the sons of Israel out of the land of Egypt by their hosts. (12:50-51)

IV. A Reflection On Our Birth Narrative

Birth narratives are extremely important. They gift us with our identity, and provide a portrait of our destiny. When Israel languished in exile with very little hope, Isaiah used the memory of the Exodus to give the exiles a vision for her future. He announced that there would be another birth narrative greater than the first Exodus:

"Who has ever heard of such a thing?

Who has ever seen such things?

Can a country be born in a day

or a nation be brought forth in a moment?

Yet no sooner is Zion in labor

than she gives birth to her children." (Isa 66:8 NIV)

God proclaims that what he did at the Exodus he would do again: Israel would be born in a day. There would be another lamb slain, a more vile enemy defeated, and the people of God would be liberated from the tyranny of evil. The prophet Zechariah described what worship would look like as the people of God embraced this new birth narrative. As they looked closely at the blood of the lamb they would imitate what God the Father did on that day:

"I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him, like the bitter weeping over a first-born." (Zech 12:10)

When we learn to weep bitterly over the cross, we know that the New Exodus has arrived in our hearts. During the years of 1743-1747, David Brainerd labored and preached among the Indians of New Jersey and Pennsylvania. On August 8th, 1745, he preached to about sixty-five Indians on Luke 14:16-23. Following his message, the Spirit that Zechariah spoke of fell upon them "like a mighty rushing wind," and "with astonishing energy bore down on all before it." He goes on to describe the holy phenomenon:

I stood amazed at the influence, which seized the audience almost universally; and could compare it to nothing more aptly, than the irresistible force of a mighty torrent, or a swelling deluge, that with its insupportable weight and pressure bears down and sweeps before it whatever comes in its way. Almost all persons of all ages were bowed down with concern together, and scarcely one was able to withstand the shock of this surprising operation.

There was almost universal praying and crying for mercy in every part of the house, and many out of doors; and numbers could neither go nor stand. Their concern was so great, each one for himself, that none seemed to take any notice of those about him, but each prayed freely for himself. I am led to think they were, to their own apprehensions, as much retired as if they had been, individually by themselves, in the thickest desert; or I believe rather that they thought nothing about anything but themselves, and their own state, and so were every one praying apart, although all together.

It seemed to me that there was now an exact fulfillment of that prophecy (Zech 12:10-13); for there was now "a great mourning, like the mourning of Hadad-Rimmon,"⁸ and each seemed to "mourn apart." I thought this had a near resemblance to that day of God's power, mentioned in Joshua 10:14; for I must say I never saw any day like it, in all respects: it was a day wherein I am persuaded the Lord did much to destroy the kingdom of darkness among this people.⁹

I must confess that I have wept bitterly over the loss of a firstborn son, but I have not wept with the same intensity over my own sin. May God in his grace lead us as a congregation to that holy place. Amen.

1. Walter Brueggemann, "Exodus," in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 1:780.

2. Brueggemann, "Exodus," 780.

3. This is Brueggemann's observation: "Exodus," 780.

4. Fretheim's view is, "This figure is an approximate representation of the population at the time of David and Solomon. It thus becomes a way of confessing that all Israel from this later time was brought out of Egypt by their God." Terence Fretheim, *Exodus* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 144-145.

5. Waldemar Janzen, *Exodus* (BCBC; Scottdale: Herald, 2000), 159-160.

6. Ray C. Stedman, "The Case of the Sneaky Housewife," <http://www.pbc.org/dp/Stedman/behind/0456.html>.

7. Norman Theiss, "The Passover Feast of the New Covenant," *Interpretation* 48:1 (1994), 28.

8. Hadad-Rimmon, the place where Josiah died, is a reference to the mourning that accompanied his death.

9. *David Brainerd's Personal Testimony Selected from his Journal and Diary* by Walter Searle (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 73-77.