

The Feast of Freedom as an Act of Defiance

Exodus 6:1-13, Luke 22:1-16

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Because we do not celebrate the Lord's Supper with fireworks, we may forget that this is a celebration of freedom. This meal is based on the Passover which is the Jewish Independence Day. The Passover meal is a time for remembering what God did when he set his people free and made them a nation. Whenever Jews have eaten this meal, they have reminded themselves that the true God is a liberating God. It is God who made us a people and not we ourselves. And the God who saved us and made us a people can save us again.

That's the hope that underlies the Passover and underlies the Lord's Supper as well. I loved Robert Hill's song selection, *Mary Don't You Weep*. Why does it matter—as the refrain says over and over—that Pharaoh's army got drowned? That fact is the basis for telling Mary not to cry: you don't have to cry because God is a liberating God, God is a mighty God who is more powerful than the slave master, more powerful than the evil rulers, more powerful than evil itself. When that spiritual was first sung, no doubt it meant that just as God freed the Hebrew slaves from their Egyptian masters, God would free the African slaves from their American masters. And he did! The God of the Bible, the God of Jesus, is not—contrary to stereotypes—a God of the oppressors and a tale told to keep slaves in their place. The story of the God of the Bible is a story that has always given the oppressed hope and ultimately given them freedom.

Mary Don't You Weep combines Old Testament and New Testament images, even mentioning Jesus' name. So does this meal. The old feast of freedom become the new feast of freedom through what Jesus did for us on the cross. Who is the Mary in the song? Some think it is Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, who sang a song of triumph when God threw horse and rider into the sea. Some think it is Mary Magdalene, who weeps in the garden near Jesus' tomb, thinking he has died. Some think it is Mary the sister of Lazarus, whose brother has died and needs to be reminded that the God who set his people free from slavery can set her brother free from death. Take your pick. Or take all of the above. But I think the clear point of the song is that the salvation of God's people in the Exodus is a source of hope for us.

What we sometimes forget is that most of the time the Passover has been celebrated over the centuries, it has been celebrated by Jews who were oppressed—sometimes occupied, sometimes in exile, sometimes scattered without a homeland. Think of what it means for a Jew to celebrate the deliverance from Egypt in a time when they are oppressed again. To a Jew in that situation, the Passover was like singing “Pharaoh's army got drowned” when everybody knew it meant that God could drown Caesar's army too. When Jews in recent centuries have celebrated the Passover saying “Next year in Jerusalem” even when Jerusalem was not under the control of Jews, it was an act of both defiance and hope. It's like the African slaves in this country singing “Go down Moses, tell old Pharaoh, set my people free.” It's not just a song about something long ago. It's a song about my own liberation.

When Jesus celebrated the Passover under Roman occupation, it was not a history lesson but a celebration of the liberating God in the darkest of times. It was like the French citizens in the movie *Casablanca* singing the “La Marseillaise” when the Germans were in control of the situation. It would be like the people of Hungary singing their national anthem

in secret after Russians tanks rolled through, making clear that there would be no freedom. To eat this meal and tell the story of our liberating God in the situation of having to live under the rule of a foreign king who claims to be a god begins to be an act of defiance. For a Jew to eat the Passover is to say: Whatever the situation is now, it is still true that we worship the one God whom we call the King of the Universe; it is still true that he is a God who sets his people free; he is still able to overthrow the forces of paganism and evil and deliver us from death.

In Luke 22, Jesus says to his disciples who have become his family, "I have desired with fervent desire to eat this Passover with you before I suffer, for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." Already there is a plot to kill Jesus. Already Satan has entered into Judas and he has arranged to betray Jesus. Jesus is not a prisoner having a last meal before he dies, though. Jesus is marking the beginning of a new covenant. He is sharing this ancient and joyful feast of freedom in the hope that God's kingdom will come through his dying and that the meaning of the Passover—God's liberation of his people—will be fulfilled in a new way, that God will finally set his people free, not just politically but spiritually.

Then Jesus takes the bread and the cup and uses the words which are so familiar to us. He takes the unleavened bread and says "This is my body given for you." He used the bread as a symbol to point to himself as the sacrifice—obviously his body was still there in the room, not turning into bread. He said, "Do this in remembrance of me." Everything else that you have done tonight has been in remembrance of what God did in Egypt. But do this in remembrance of *me*. Just as you eat the Passover to remember the great thing God did in giving you freedom from Egypt, eat this bread to remember the great thing God is going to do in giving you freedom from sin and death. Then Jesus took the cup of wine and said "This is God's new covenant sealed with my blood, which is poured out for you." He could hardly have said it more plainly: I am going to die for you. I am the Passover lamb being sacrificed so that God can make a new covenant with you, which will make you God's new people and make you truly free.

So today we do this to remember what Jesus did for us and to celebrate our freedom. Still, we like the Jews in Jesus' time and like Jews throughout history, do not eat this meal in complete freedom. We know that God's reign is not complete in this world. As Christians we still eat this meal of freedom in a situation of oppression, and so we take this bread and this cup in a spirit of defiance and hope. Even though other powers seem to rule in this world, when we share our Christian Passover we remind ourselves that God will triumph. Let me suggest three ways this meal of freedom is an act of defiance:

1. We eat this meal in defiance of the absolute claims of government. Jesus celebrated the Passover on the night when the Roman government took him away to execute him. He said to the Roman authority, "You have no power except that which God gives you." Christians have always said that to Caesar. The same Paul who taught that we should be submissive to the authorities modeled that submission not by obeying their laws against unauthorized religions but by willingly going to jail. In a culture in which people were expected to affirm that "Caesar is Lord," early Christians confessed that "Jesus Christ is Lord!" They were put to death not because they taught that Jesus was God but because they were accused of being unpatriotic.

It is important on the Fourth of July that we not confuse God and country. Whatever freedom our citizens enjoy comes from God. Government has no absolute claim on my

allegiance. Baptists are the Christians who took the clearest stand on this: that the government has no authority over the conscience or the soul. The government can never take away my right to pray or my right to preach or my right to gather to worship. We believe that it is not America that had made us free. It is God who has made us free, the same God who drowned Pharaoh's army and raised Jesus from the dead.

2. We eat this meal in defiance of the power of Satan. The evil one acts as if he were in charge of this world, and some Christians believe the lie. Jesus has set us free from the power of evil in our lives. On the cross the devil's army was drowned. 1 John 4:4 (NIV) says "You...have overcome [the forces of Satan], because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world." In early church baptismal services – and in some churches to this day – the candidates would turn around and face Satan, and say "We renounce you!" In the same way, we take the cup of freedom and we shake it in the face of the evil one and laugh: You can't have me! I have been bought with a price! I have been set free!

3. We eat this meal in defiance of the power of death. The world acts as if death has the last word. We are taught that even if we defeat every other enemy we will still lose to the last enemy, death. But Jesus shared this meal on the very eve of his death in a spirit of hope because he knew that death did not have power over him. In a demonstration of power that dwarfs the miracle at the Red Sea, God raised Jesus from the dead and won a final victory over death. We don't have to fear death. We have passed, once and for all, from death into life and we will be with Jesus the living one forever. We can lift this cup and say with John Donne, "Death, be not proud...death, thou shalt die!"

So we share this meal not in resignation or in guilt. We are the ones who have been set free and are being set free. This is our spiritual Fourth of July celebration. Let us eat and drink, if not with fireworks, with joyful and grateful hearts.