



Proper 23, Year A – September 4, 2011

Exodus 18.15-20

A Homily preached by the Rev'd Tara Livingston

During this season after Pentecost we are able to hear all of the most well known and oft repeated Old Testament readings. Just in the past few weeks we've heard about the betrayal of Joseph, his grand offer of forgiveness to his brothers, the story of Moses' birth, amazing upbringing and his encounter with God in the form a burning bush.

Today we hear the great Passover story, the story of the last of the great plagues, the ninth in the series. In this story we hear how God promises to take the lives of all of the firstborn in the land and to save those who listen and follow; what God tells the people of Israel to might sound simple enough but it is in fact a very burdensome undertaking.

They must find a lamb; not just any lamb but an unblemished one year old lamb on the tenth day of the month, keep it for four days and then, as a community, slaughter it at twilight on the fourteenth day. Imagine the competition for the perfect sacrifice that might have ensued after this. After all, all of the people of Israel wanted their children to survive this last and final plague. Then, after they had slaughtered this unblemished lamb they were to mark their doorposts with its blood so that their homes would be spared this final wrath. The lamb was to be consumed in a particular manner while wearing particular garments and then and only then would they be spared from the sting of death. They would be spared because they were faithful enough to follow God's commands to the letter as signalled by the blood on the door posts.

One of the commentaries I read this week suggested something shallow in displaying ones faith on the outside of ones house without any mention of what was happening internally. This writer was suggesting that Passover sacrifice was only skin deep, so to speak, only faithful on the surface and not, necessarily, deep in their hearts.

I disagree. While some of those folks after marking their door posts, dressing, roasting and consuming their slaughter as instructed may still have walked into their homes and beaten their wives or neglected their children, I like to think that it wouldn't last for long. Having listened to God's instructions and responding in faith they would eventually be changed in the deepest places in their souls, would it not? Or at least, should it not?

Sometimes, ladies and gentlemen, I'm sure that it's all you can do to get up, brush your teeth, get dressed and head here on a Sunday morning. Like most of us, all of us perhaps, there are times when we are simply going through the motions, the motions of religion, of faith, of love. Sometimes we can only reach out with a grudging smile even as our heart feels closed both from God and from one another. Sometimes we simply go through the motions of our liturgy without feeling touched or connected to one another or with God. Sometimes as we utter the words of the prayers long stored in our memory they are simply words being spoken out loud rather than prayers being prayed to our God.

But sometimes that's enough. Just as the people of Israel found faith in going through the motions of marking their doorposts with the blood of the lamb we can find faith in brushing our teeth and showing up – even then we have something better to do. Sometimes simply going through the motions of receiving communion can be enough to bring about change. Sometimes beginning to utter some words long remembered can lead us into actually praying.

God responds to faithfulness. In today's Gospel we hear Jesus telling his followers that "if two of you agree in earth about anything you ask it will be done for you by my Father in heaven." For some this Gospel passage has come to mean that God is a vending machine God. The kind of God where we insert our prayers like change in the slot, select the desired outcome by pressing A15 and anticipating how it will be answered. We cannot put in our prayer request, pull the arm down with an Amen and expect the answered prayer to tumble out, perfectly packaged and exactly as we envisioned. But God does respond to faithfulness it just might look very different than what we expected. I'm sure that the people of Israel were surprised to find themselves protecting their children by displaying the sacrificed blood of a one year old unblemished lamb, but they did it anyway.

So, pray and let God answer as God will answer instead of being disappointed with the result. Do it anyway.

And put on your jacket and come to Church to take part in community, to celebrate our saviour and ask God's forgiveness even when there's something better to do. Do it anyway.

And have faith, faith that the God of Moses and the people of Israel did, is now, and will always respond to God's people. Even when you don't know what the answer is, have faith anyway.

And for prayer, for community and for faith, thanks be to God.