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March 5th: Exodus 12 & Matthew 15:1-28

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The Passover. Nullifying God's commandment for tradition; the faith of a Canaanite woman.

Exodus 4:22-23 (the initial threat to the firstborn); Genesis 19 (the destruction of Sodom); Genesis 33:17 (Succoth in Jacob's journeys).

Exodus 21:17 (judgment upon those dishonouring father or mother); Isaiah 29:13 (draw near with mouths, but hearts far from me); Matthew 10:5-6 (the lost sheep of the house of Israel); Matthew 8:5-13 (the faith of the centurion praised).

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Exodus 12. 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 father's 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. 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. This day shall be for you a memorial day, and you shall keep it as a feast to the Lord throughout your generations. As a statute forever you shall keep it as a feast.

Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall remove leaven out of your houses. For if anyone eats what is leavened from the first day until the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel.

On the first day you shall hold a holy assembly, and on the seventh day a holy assembly. No work shall be done on those days, but what everyone needs to eat, that alone may be prepared by you. And you shall observe the feast of unleavened bread.

For on this very day I brought your hosts out of the land of Egypt. Therefore you shall observe this day throughout your generations as a statute forever. In the first month, from the fourteenth day of the month at evening, you shall eat unleavened bread until the twenty-first day of the month at evening.

For seven days no leaven is to be found in your houses. If anyone eats what is leavened, that person will be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether he is a sojourner or a native of the land. You shall eat nothing leavened.

In all your dwelling places you shall eat unleavened bread. Then Moses called all the elders of Israel and said to them, Go and select lambs for yourselves according to your clans and kill the Passover lamb. Take a bunch of hyssop and dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and touch the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood that is in the basin.

None of you shall go out of the door of his house until the morning. For the Lord will pass through to strike the Egyptians, and when he seeds the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the Lord will pass over the house and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you. You shall observe this right as a statute for you and for your sons forever.

And when you come to the land that the Lord will give you, as he has promised, you shall keep this service. And when your children say to you, What do you mean by this service? You shall say, It is the sacrifice of the Lord's Passover. For he passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt, when he struck the Egyptians but spared our houses.

And the people bowed their heads and worshipped. Then the people of Israel went and did so, as the Lord had commanded Moses and Aaron, so they did. At midnight the Lord struck down 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 the livestock.

And Pharaoh rose up in the night, he and all his servants and all the Egyptians. And there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was not a house where someone was not dead. Then he summoned Moses and Aaron by night and said, Up, go out from among my people, both you and the people of Israel, and go serve the Lord as you have said.

Take your flocks and your herds, as you have said, and be gone, and bless me also. The Egyptians were urgent with the people to send them out of the land in haste, for they said, We shall all be dead. So the people took their dough before it was leavened, their kneading bowls being bound up in their cloaks on their shoulders.

The people of Israel had also done as Moses told them, for they had asked the Egyptians for silver and gold jewellery and for clothing. And the Lord had given the people favour in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked. Thus they plundered the Egyptians.

And the people of Israel journeyed from Ramses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children. A mixed multitude also went up with them, and very many livestock, both flocks and herds. And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had brought out of Egypt, for it was not leavened, because they were thrust out of Egypt and could not wait, nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves.

The time that the people of Israel lived in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years. At the end of four hundred and thirty years, on that very day, all the hosts of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt. It was a night of watching by the Lord, to bring them out of the land of Egypt.

So this same night is a night of watching kept to the Lord by all the people of Israel throughout their generations. And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, This is the statute of the Passover. No foreigner shall eat of it, but every slave that is bought for money may eat of it after you have circumcised him.

No foreigner or hired worker may eat of it. It shall be eaten in one house. You shall not take any of the flesh outside the house, and you shall not break any of its bones.

All the congregation of Israel shall keep it. If a stranger shall sojourn with you and would keep the Passover to the Lord, let all his males be circumcised, then he may come near and keep it. He shall be as a native of the land, but no uncircumcised person shall eat of it.

There shall be one law for the native and for the stranger who sojourns among you. All the people of Israel did just as the Lord commanded Moses and Aaron. And on that very day the Lord brought the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt by their hosts.

Exodus chapter 12 begins strangely. It begins with the words, The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt. This snatches us out of the narrative and positions us at a point from which we are looking back.

Why is this? It seems to be the institution of something that should be ongoing within Israel's life. At this key point, liturgy supersedes and interprets narrative as the most important narrative of all in the life of Israel. It takes the form of ongoing ritual.

We're expected to understand the story of the Passover through the lens of the continued liturgy of the Passover. The point of the Passover is not so much the original event as the continued practice. The force of the original events continues.

And the point of the ritual is the future practice in the land. And there are a number of references to this within this chapter. It's looking forward, as are a number of the things in chapter 13, to what they will continue to do when they're in the land.

This event of deliverance will be one that they look back on and which has continued force and emphasis within their lives. It looks forward, not just back. It's a sign of hope, not just one of memory.

And beyond establishing a new ritual, God also resets the calendar. This will provide the basis for Israel's future experience of time. The interruption of the narrative at this point to institute an ongoing ritual has the effect of heightening suspense.

We're waiting for what's going to happen, for the hammer to fall. And at this point, we're held back. We're waiting for this institution of the Passover.

And once that has taken place, then we can hear about the judgment. The symbolism of

the Passover is worth tearing with. There's a lot that could be explored here, but here are a few brief thoughts.

They leave in haste through a bloody door. In the story of the Exodus, the prominence of themes of birth and stories of birth are not accidental. And in the chapter that follows, we'll see more emphasis upon this.

Israel is God's firstborn son, and the story of the Exodus is the story of a coming to birth. We might also think about some other details of the rite. Why a pot without water in it? Why eat the meal in a group? Why do they have to draw out a lamb? Why do they dip the hyssop in blood? There are many different ways we could explore this.

Perhaps there are some connections with the rite for leprosy, but perhaps we are also supposed to see connections with the story of Joseph. The pot without water in it might remind us of Joseph being thrown into a cistern without water. Why eat the meal in a group? They had thrown Joseph into the cistern and sat down and ate a meal together.

Why did they draw out a lamb? Well, the last time that same phrase was used was in the story of Genesis 37, where Joseph was drawn out of the pit to be brought down into Egypt. Now they're going to have to draw their brother out of Egypt and bring him back to the land, to the place where he first got lost. Why dip the hyssop in blood? Because the brothers dipped Joseph's tunic in blood and presented it to their father.

What is the blood that the tunic is dipped in? The blood of a sheep or a goat. And the goat's blood was that which was used to feign the death of their brother. The story of the Exodus is in part the story of the rescue of Joseph, the brother that was lost in Egypt, and the restoration of him back to the land.

It's the expectation at the end of the book of Genesis. It's the event that takes place in the next chapter as they go up with the bones of Joseph. And in the book of Joshua at the very end, it's the culmination of the story of the Exodus, the burial of Joseph.

God will execute a final judgment upon the gods of Egypt at this point. We see this in verse 12. Throughout this story, God has been judging not just the Egyptians, not just Pharaoh, but also their gods, proving his supremacy in every realm of the universe, that he is above any name that might be named, any god that might be appealed to, that he proves his supremacy and his power in the realm where they would claim power.

Once again, the story of the Exodus is the manifestation of the uniqueness of God's identity throughout, not just to Israel, but to Egypt and the nations. God strikes the firstborn son, and Israel is God's firstborn son. We saw the threat of this in chapter 4, verses 22-23, and now it's carried out.

If you do not let my firstborn son go, I will kill your firstborn son. Once again, there's a judgment that corresponds to the crime of killing the Hebrew boys, the boys of the

firstborn nation. Now the firstborn boys of Egypt are killed.

The firstborn represents, among other things, the strength of the family. The firstborn is the one who pushes forward the family's destiny, and also is the standard bearer for its identity. The firstborn is also the bridge between generations, the bridge between parents and children, representing the mediation of the parents' influence to the younger siblings.

As God takes the lives of the firstborn, he's judging Egypt for what it has done to his firstborn. His firstborn, Israel, is supposed to lead the other nations into his worship. And as his firstborn has been taken by another, he will strike that opponent until they let his firstborn free.

The Israelites dress themselves with the plunder and the riches of the Egyptians, as they had been promised by God earlier on. They leave with 600,000 men, besides women and children. This is military numbering.

They are God's hosts, leaving the land to enter into a new land. The numbers here might also recall those connected with the Ark and the Age of Noah. There are similar factors, and maybe we're supposed to see some sort of connection.

The purpose of the ritual only becomes clear in verses 12 and 13, as God explains why he will pass over their houses as the blood is displayed. This pattern has already been anticipated in Sodom's destruction to some degree. They eat a meal of unleavened bread at night.

There is a threat at the doorway. They are saved at the doorway from the destroying angels, and the others are struck with blindness. And then they're rescued and brought out of the city.

This is a similar pattern to the one that we see in the story of the Exodus. They journey to Succoth. Maybe we can think back to Genesis 33, verse 17, where Jacob first journeys to Succoth after meeting Esau.

It's a different Succoth, but it's named again for the booths that are established there. The feast of unleavened bread involves the cutting off of leaven, a principle of life and food that connected them with this ongoing ritual of life within Egypt. That has to be broken with.

They have to make a new start, and the cutting off of the old leaven is a sign of that. No longer continuing that pattern, but breaking with that generative pattern of life and food in Egypt, and starting something new. A connection between the cutting off of leaven and the cutting off of the foreskin should probably be recognised here.

In both cases, there's a ritual of division and separation occurring. The continued leaven

being cut off represents a breach with the life of Egypt. And then that is connected later on with the importance of circumcision.

They must prepare for the Passover by cutting off the leaven. They must also prepare for the Passover by cutting off the foreskin. Both of them connected with principles of generation and continued life.

Ritual in these sorts of situations can function as a protective hedge against judgement. Note the way that ritual and institution are often established in the context of judgement, shielding people from wrath. So circumcision occurs just before judgement falls upon Sodom and Gomorrah and the land.

And the Levites are established for a blessing in the context of the judgement at Sinai. Phinehas is set apart for high priestly ministry as he stands up and stops the plague. Passover is established in the context of judgement falling upon Egypt.

The temple is established on the site where God's judgement and the sword of the angel of the Lord is stayed. In all of these places we see ritual and the institutions of Israel's ritual life serving as protective hedges against God's judgement. Holding back God's judgement when he comes near in his holiness and protecting the people from the full force.

The blood on the doorposts and the importance of circumcision might remind us of the encounter on the way to Egypt and Zipporah's circumcision of Gershom. That's a proto-Passover event. It's also an event connected with birth.

And what we're having here is this playing out for the entire nation. They are experiencing what Moses experienced on the way back to the land. And all of this is preparing Israel for its ongoing identity into the future.

This passage is not just about a historical event but by a fundamental generative principle of Israel's life and identity as a people. This is the event to which they will look not only in memory but in hope. It's the framework in which they understand God's concern for them as a people and look forward to the future in which God will reveal and fulfil the true promise of this historical deliverance.

In ritual we are recounting God's great works but we are looking forward to God's greater deliverances. He has made a statement of intent in these historical deliverances and we look forward to the full revelation and realisation of those things in the future. A question to consider.

How does the Passover help us to understand the Christian practice of the Lord's Supper? Matthew chapter 15 verses 1 to 28. Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat. He answered them, And why do you break

the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God commanded, Honour your father and your mother, and whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.

But you say, If anyone tells his father or his mother what you would have gained from me as given to God, he need not honour his father. So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you when he said, This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.

In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. And he called the people to him and said to them, Hear and understand. It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a person.

Then the disciples came and said to him, Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying? He answered, Every plant that my heavenly father has not planted will be rooted up. Let them alone. They are blind guides, and if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.

But Peter said to him, Explain the parable to us. And he said, Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled, but what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the mouth come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.

These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone. And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon.

And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David, my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon. But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, Send her away, for she is crying out after us.

He answered, I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. But she came and knelt before him, saying, Lord, help me. And he answered, It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.

She said, Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table. Then Jesus answered her, O woman, great is your faith. Be it done for you as you desire.

And her daughter was healed instantly. Matthew 15 verses 1 to 20 is an objection story with three scenes. Jesus engages first with the Pharisees and the scribes in verses 1 to 9, then with the people more generally in verses 10 to 11, and then finally with the disciples in verses 13 to 20.

Jesus accuses the Pharisees and scribes when they ask him about his disciples not washing their hands. He accuses them of undermining the commandment of God

through their tradition. There's an ongoing theme in the Gospel of Matthew of law keeping and breaking.

Jesus seeks to fulfill the law. And this is not just a focus upon every nitty gritty detail of the law in just the letter. It's about fulfilling the deep intent of the law.

As we've seen just earlier in his teaching on the Sabbath, Jesus is concerned to fulfill the purpose of rest, not just to obey some commandment that's narrowly focused upon external observance. Jesus contrasts fulfilling with making void. The Pharisees make void the law.

They act in a way that undermines the deep intent of the law. Rather than actually serving to honour parents, they seek to find some way to circumvent God's purpose in the commandment. They are not fulfilling the spirit.

They're using the letter and a perverse distortion of the letter to undermine the spirit. This whole section is bookended with statements about cleansing hands when eating. Jesus is dealing with the objection but within a far more fundamental challenge to the Pharisees and the scribes and their form of religion.

Tradition is to be judged, as Jesus teaches here, by scripture. And the problem for the Pharisees is primarily their hypocrisy. The way that they are focusing upon external observances that hide the impurity of the heart.

And the purity of the heart is absolutely integral for Christ. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. The point of this passage is not primarily an argument against food laws, but rather against the Pharisaic use of the tradition.

Even the Levitical law highlighted that what came out was the real problem. Things were impure because they emerged from flesh, not because they came in and defiled persons who were already pure. Once again Jesus is challenged here concerning the behaviour of his disciples, as he was at the beginning of chapter 12 concerning their Sabbath practice.

And Jesus answers a question with a question. This is a rhetorical practice that Jesus employs on a number of different occasions. It's a way of throwing the challenge back to the people who have thrown it at him.

And here Jesus is emphasizing that the Pharisees and scribes have no basis upon which to make this claim to him. They have no authority from which to make it. As far from being those who are upholding the law and in position to judge others concerning it.

They are those who are concerned with undermining the law. Of avoiding rather than observing its intent. Jesus underlines the importance of the commandment to honour parents with the citation of Exodus chapter 21 verse 17.

In addition to the citation of the fifth commandment. That those who dishonour father and mother should be put to death. This is the severest penalty.

And yet they are undermining the spirit of that law entirely. Trying to find some escape clause. Some way to avoid it.

And the use of the Corban vow to defraud one's neighbour. In this case parents from what is due to them. Is something that cuts loose love for God from love to neighbour.

Which should be its necessary corollary. Jesus quotes Isaiah chapter 29 verse 14. And maybe we should pay attention to the context of that verse here.

Because this people draw near with their mouth and honour me with their lips. While their hearts are far from me. And their fear of me is a commandment taught by men.

Therefore behold I will again do wonderful things with this people. With wonder upon wonder. And the wisdom of their wise men shall perish.

And the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden. As usual when we are reading quotes from the Old Testament and the New. We need to consider what comes around the quote that is used.

Not just the quote itself. And here I think that wider context can maybe be seen as part of the condemnation of them. That Jesus is going to perform all these wonders, all these signs.

And rather than actually responding to them. There will be forms of judgement upon them. Jesus does not directly answer the Pharisees question at this point.

He simply levels a counter accusation. He fundamentally challenges the grounds on which they are making the accusation. They are falsely claiming authority as arbiters of proper adherence to God's law.

While violating it themselves. Jesus teaches again here that what comes out of the mouth is what really matters. The importance of the tongue is that it can manifest the heart.

Now this is speech but he also includes other things. But the tongue is symbolic of the place where things emerge from the heart the most. We should probably beware of seeing this simply as a light dismissal of the food laws.

Rather than a disclosure of their true rationale. The point here I don't think is that Jesus wants to just abrogate the old food laws. You have that sense in Mark to some degree.

But I think there is more going on. Rather the concern is to understand what they are really about. What really makes the logic of the food laws work? Is it about avoiding

external impurity? Or is it about symbolising something more about the pursuit of internal purity? Jesus is fond of highlighting the radical antitheses that one encounters for instance in the prophets.

Pitting the external practice over against its internal rationale and purpose. So mercy versus sacrifice. The point of such an opposition is not that sacrifice shouldn't be made.

Or should be negated or abrogated. The tradition isn't being rejected wholesale. Rather Jesus is showing the proper integrity of heart and act that should exist.

He speaks about these people as those who are not the planting of God. That will be uprooted. You can maybe consider this in light of the parable of the wheat and the tares.

Just a few chapters earlier. He presents implicitly the Pharisees as tares here. And as religious authorities they are supposed to be guides to the blind.

But they are actually like blind leading the blind. Peter speaks for the disciples asking for explanation of Jesus' challenge to the authority of the Pharisees. And Jesus then addresses the original point of the confrontation and the challenge.

There's a loose relationship of Jesus' list of defiling things that arise from the heart. With the sixth to the tenth commandments. The commandments from murder to covetousness.

And there's an emphasis then upon the internal posture that is ultimately foundational to all true law observance. We've seen in Jesus' teaching in many points that he's about the fulfilment of the law. And the serving of its true intent.

Not to the doing away with the ritual and external observances. But to the fulfilment of the true intent that will make those ritual external observances have their proper place and purpose. Jesus ends with a reference back to the challenge that was given first in verse 2. Which has the effect of tying the whole section together.

It also provides some sort of rationale that's more explicit within the book of Mark for Gentile inclusion. Even though they may not be observing these symbolic commandments. They are observing the true reality of the heart.

The incident that follows with the Canaanite woman approaching Jesus to heal her child is one that has caused many problems for people. Who have felt that the character of Jesus as displayed in this incident is uncaring and unloving. I don't think that's actually the case.

I think that a careful reading of this particular incident will help us to see what's truly going on. There are four requests made to Jesus. First of all by the woman.

Then by the disciples who have been troubled and pestered by the woman. Then by the

woman again. And then by the woman again.

She's rebuffed the first time with silence. Then there's a statement made to the disciples about the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And the fact that Christ is sent only to them.

Then there's the statement about the children's food. And this isn't the first time or the last when Jesus presents obstacles to someone so that they can prove their faith. Note that Jesus doesn't send her away at the disciples' request.

What he does is present an obstacle instead. He declares that he's been sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And that's not something that is just dismissive.

It's not just something that is untrue either. He has been sent to them in particular. And there is a sense in which this obstacle is a real obstacle.

It's not just one that's made up for the sake of things. In chapter 10 verses 5-6 Jesus says, Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. This is the particular remit of his calling.

This is who he's focusing upon. And he speaks in the harshest terms it might seem of not giving children's bread to the dogs. Now it's quite possible Jesus is quoting a proverb here.

And that this particular statement should not be seen as Christ's own words but him repeating some statement that might have been current at the time. And the woman counters in terms of the proverb itself. Not treating the proverb as a final rebuff but using it as leverage to gain Christ's action.

Some have suggested that we should see behind this incident and the interaction that precedes it some relation to the Gentile mission that comes later on in the book of Acts. Perhaps that's the case. The gospel will go to those outside of the house of Israel.

Perhaps the most instructive parallel for understanding this incident however is found in Matthew chapter 8. Where Jesus is approached by the centurion who wants to have his servant healed. Once again it's a Gentile requesting for the healing of someone else. And Jesus in both cases gives a discouraging response.

When he responds to the centurion he says, Shall I come and heal him? The point being, do you expect me to come and heal him? And the centurion responds, Lord I am not worthy to have you come under my roof. But only say the word and my servant will be healed. Once again there's a discouraging response given and a persistent answer to that response from Christ.

That demonstrates in both cases great faith. In both of these stories the Gentile then goes on to make a statement that is profoundly illuminating. For the centurion it's a

statement about authority and the power of Christ's word.

And for the Canaanite woman it's a different sort of statement. It's a statement about the extent of God's gifts and that they can overflow beyond their initial intended recipients. And Jesus in response to the faith of the centurion says that he has not found anyone in Israel with such faith.

And then later on when he's talking to the Canaanite woman he makes a similar sort of statement. Oh woman, great is your faith. These people are set forth not just as people that Christ grudgingly lets go through.

But rather as people that Christ presents obstacles to but whose faith perseveres and persists and receives a reward. Jesus presents these then not just as exceptional cases but as examples that are held forth of faith for everyone. When we read the story of the Canaanite woman this is a story that provides an example for us to follow.

Not just someone who slipped through and managed to get something that wasn't intended for her. But rather someone who demonstrates the claim that faith has upon God's good gifts. And the way in which a persevering faith can receive from God's hand things that might seem initially to be denied.

A question to consider. In the Gospel of Mark the woman is described as a Syrophenician. Whereas here she's described as a Canaanite.

What connotations and significance might there be in describing her as a Canaanite woman? Why do you think that Matthew uses this particular term?