

(For the gift of God’s word as we just heard it, we say, “Thanks be to God.”)

I. Intro: Now as we begin Lent, it’s time to say, “Happy New Year!”

A. You may wonder, “Why would I wish you a happy new year near the end of February?”

1. True, we’re not beginning anything new in church calendars, since school isn’t starting & our church fiscal year isn’t starting...
2. Even the liturgical year of the seasons of the Christian calendar doesn’t start now in Lent, it starts around Dec. 1 with Advent
3. Actually in my household it’s doubly a new year
 - a) This past week I entered my 51st year, which hardly seems possible, considering my son who lives in China was in 8th grade when we moved here to Goshen!
 - b) And speaking of China, if our Chinese student Jason were here this morning, we could wish him *Xinnian kuaile!* (Happy Chinese New Year) ... but he’s actually on his way from Winter Youth Retreat to a New Year celebration in Chicago’s Chinatown
 - c) But these things are true for my household, not for the whole church.

B. So what’s really new? Why would it be a new year now here at church?

1. If you’re skeptical about this particular time signifying anything really new, you’d be in good company
2. In some ways, skepticism re. starting a new year now reminds me of how the Israelite slaves in Egypt might have reacted when they first heard Moses pass along these instructions from God

II. Let’s look closer at these 2 Passover stories from the Bible, both the original and Jesus’ adaptation of it

A. In Exo. 12, God was giving Moses & Aaron *instructions for establishing what would become Festival of the Passover*

1. Ch. 12 is not so much an action part of the story as an explanation part:
 - a) God wants Moses & Aaron to understand in advance that what’s going to happen is a big deal.
 - b) It will be an “historic moment” for the generations to remember
2. Listen to v. 2 again (read) as if God were saying, “*What I’m about to do will mark a new year for you. You are now to measure time from this event.*”

3. Then God gives instructions not only for what the Israelites should do on a certain night, but also how they & their descendants should relive & celebrate this night in the years to come

B. Most importantly for Exo. 12, *these instructions come after nine plagues but before any actual deliverance happens*

1. Timing is important for us to understand this passage: We read it in hindsight, after thousands of years of passing along the stories of God delivering the slaves from Egypt & the Jews celebrating this with the Passover

2. What do you want to bet ordinary Israelites were initially slow to obey & carry out those 1st Passover preparations? ...

a) May have been skeptical about the prediction they heard in vv. 12-13 re. God striking down the 1stborn of Egyptians but not their own 1stborn

b) Had reasons to be skeptical (*put yourself in their sandals*):

9 times they'd already seen God send plagues on Egyptians but not on themselves & 9 times got their hopes up for freedom

Several times Pharaoh looked like he was softening up a bit, but always Pharaoh had changed his mind & the Israelites' oppression continued or got worse

c) We wouldn't blame them today for failing to see that God was at work behind the hardening of Pharaoh's heart ...

d) We wouldn't blame them for seeing this mighty God as ultimately too weak to overcome Pharaoh's power & stubbornness

3. After all, the reality on the ground is: they're still slaves and Pharaoh's still in control ... It takes a lot of faith to celebrate a liberation that hasn't happened yet!

C. If we jump ahead about 1300 years to the Passover story with Jesus, there's also reason for some similar skepticism from his disciples

1. For the previous few days they had been with Jesus in Bethany, just a few miles outside Jerusalem.

2. Meanwhile hundreds of thousands of Jewish pilgrims were flocking to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover feast

a) And Jesus tells them to go into the city, where the Jewish officials have already issued arrest warrants on Jesus!

b) What's more, they will happen to meet some stranger carrying a jug of water, who they are to follow.

c) Then at the house where this stranger enters, they're supposed to talk to the homeowner & tell him that “The Teacher” is asking where he & his disciples can eat their Passover meal.

- d) And somehow that homeowner will not only believe this tale, but he will graciously provide a guest room for a hunted rabbi & 12 disciples?
- e) I'd be skeptical if I were one of those 2 disciples sent out on such an unlikely mission ... & yet it happened, just as Jesus had said ...

III. [What's new in the Last Supper story?]

A. We saw how the Passover that freed the Israelite slaves was such a big deal that God said they should start counting a new year from that day forward

1. In other words, the 1st Passover marked a new milestone on the up-and-down journey of God's chosen shalom covenant people
2. But what about the Last Supper with Jesus? Was there anything new about that? Indeed there was ...

B. For those 12 disciples, this was no run-of-the-mill Passover

1. If Jesus ministered over a period of 3 years, then this was probably the 3rd Passover Feast together with them ...

- a) So what about the first 2? What were they like?
- b) We have almost no record of those earlier Passovers, except for one glimpse we get in John 6:1-4:

Here Jesus was ministering to a great crowd of people by the Sea of Galilee, far from Jerusalem. This is the setting in John's Gospel for the miraculous feeding of the 5000

And it says in v. 4 it happened when the Jewish Passover Feast was near ... so we assume at least one of those Passovers Jesus spent with his disciples in their homeland

2. What was new about this particular Passover?

- a) It starts with the dinner conversation:

As they are enjoying the rituals, the fellowship & the food, Jesus tells his closest friends who for 3 years have shared his ministry, “Oh by the way, one of you here will betray me.”

Talk about a conversation-killer! Can you imagine the awkwardness? As they each ask in distress, “Is it me?” he says that it's one eating from the same bowl with him, and that things will go very badly for that man.

Can you imagine? Already at this point in the evening, this Passover is unlike any others they had experienced before

- b) After that awkward moment, Jesus takes the bread and the cup and basically hits the “reset button” for the whole meaning of Passover for his disciples after that

He says, “This bread: It is my body.”

He says, “This cup of wine: It is my blood, poured out as a sacrifice for many”

- c) The Bible doesn't tell us about his disciples' reactions to those words

For some of us today, there would be a certain “ick” factor if your friend & teacher tells you the bread you're chewing on is his own body, or the wine you're drinking is his own blood.

Maybe they were confused about what it meant, or questioning his sanity ... but in any case, they completed the meal with him

It was probably only later that they realized how significant were his words ... only then did they see that Jesus had totally recast this important Jewish Feast of the Passover into something new that represented how God was doing something new thru Jesus

IV. [Connecting this story to our world today]

A. You understand more of the who, what, & when of these Passover stories

1. Now jump with me over 3K years and several thousand miles to Vietnam in 2015

a) Some of the Mennonite churches in that country have not been recognized by the government, so life is difficult for them. In the past 10 years, several pastors and leaders have been beaten and jailed, with property destroyed or confiscated.

b) What if you were in the Evangelical Mennonite Church in Vietnam today reading in Exodus how God delivered his people from suffering and oppression?

c) Can you see how our Xian bros & sis in Vietnam (chafing under harassment by the Communist government) might hear this story about promised deliverance w/ more intensity & urgency than we do?

2. Yet there is need for deliverance for us, too in this country: deliverance from greed ... selfish thinking ... addictions ... materialism ... reliance on violence ... fear

B. Importance of these passages for us as Xians is for same 2 reasons that it was important to Israelite slaves:

1. We celebrate a deliverance from oppression that we do not yet fully see ... Like those Israelite slaves, we are not yet fully delivered

a) Ultimate power of sin & death has indeed been broken by Jesus' resurrection ... Jesus offers victory over evil, pain, & broken lives, but that victory has not quite been completed

b) In this life we still screw up ... still hurt others & ourselves ... world is still a mess & needing deliverance

c) If we are Xians, we must celebrate God's salvation, yet how can we celebrate when so much is obviously wrong in world & in our own hearts?

2. How indeed? We can do this only on the basis of faith

a) *1st ... it's a matter of faith, rather than proof*

Xian hope will never rest on modern scientific proof that God created the world,

Nor on proof that a Jewish rabbi named Jesus of Nazareth was crucified around the year 30 and verifiably rose from the dead

b) *2nd, our faith is based on what God's already done for us, and on what God promises to do*

Whether you believe all the stories in the Bible literally or not, taken together as the interpreted salvation history of our YOTB, they are ample testimony to a great God whose love for the world & for a special people is extraordinary

What's more, what God has done for us is not limited to just stories in the Bible ...

c) God is still moving and acting in today's world

V. Beginning a new church year for us has 2 things in common w/ these ancient Passover instructions:

A. a new year = good time to celebrate God's wonders & God's faithfulness, just as the Israelites did at Passover time

1. In September we entered into our Year of the Bible, which is strengthening our biblical literacy and helping the Heilsgeschichte of God's big salvation story make more sense ... now after a Bible reading we say, “For the gift of God's word, thanks be to God”
2. This past year we met and connected with neighbors thru our neighborhood picnic in September and supported local teachers and educational programs at Prairie View Elementary School
3. In the past year, we have not only formed a ministry support team behind Jerrell & Jane Ross Richer's vision of 2-way mission: we have helped them successfully raise the needed funding and we have sent them to the Ecuadorian rain forest, where they have just settled into housing and establishing relationships with local people
4. A quality & compatible pastoral team that I'm blessed to work with is also the work of God which I celebrate

B. A new church year reminds us that our deliverance from sin, evil & injustice is not complete

1. We celebrate a victory in Christ that we know is coming, yet one that we still wait to be completed
2. As pastor, here are a few e.g. of “deliverances” which I think we as WMC look to God for, yet are still waiting for:

a) We need deliverance from fear of economic insecurity (The question of “will it be enough” never seems to go away)

b) We need deliverance from fear of sharing the good news of J.C. with others, as we have experienced it

Some of us are thrilled with big efforts like ReviveIndiana while others of us question whether those are the best methods for growing the kingdom of God

But all of us need to acknowledge we are often afraid of sharing the good news of Jesus in any form

c) We need deliverance from reliance on ourselves and not the Holy Spirit

Writers like Ervin Stutzman and Ruth Haley Barton are showing us that often what gets called “discernment” in churches is nothing more than rational, secular decision-making processes in which we pray at the beginning, fail to listen for God’s voice along the way, but ask for God to bless what we already decided on our own.

d) *(Here’s perhaps the biggest need of all)* Deliverance from mistrust of those who are different from us,

Incidents in Ferguson MO, NYC & other cities show we still need deliverance from our racial & ethnic divides

Controversies in the Mennonite Church and broader society show our mistrust of people of a different sexual orientation

If we’re honest, even in church, there resides lingering mistrust of

(a) people who have more (or less) education than we do;

(b) people who make more (or less) money than we do;

(c) people whose theology and politics are different from ours

C. God knows that we may live in one of the freest countries on earth, but we are still in need of deliverance!

VI. Conclusion

A. So “Happy New Year” Waterford Mennonite Church!

B. As we continue to celebrate God’s past deliverances on our behalf, I invite you to take the next few moments of silence to personalize this living in the now & the not yet ... if you will, please reflect on 2 things ... write them in margins of bulletin if you prefer:

1. 1st, name 1 good thing that God has done for you in the past year
2. Then write down 1 thing from which you personally still need deliverance
3. Let these be the focus of your prayers this week