

24 March 2010  
Lent 5 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Death of the Firstborn”

Text: Exodus 11:1-12:32; Colossians 1:15-23; Passion Harmony, Part 5

We come tonight to the tenth plague; the last and greatest of the plagues. What blood, frogs, gnats, flies, pestilence, boils, hail, locusts, and darkness could not do, the death of the firstborn of all of Egypt will. God's people will be set free from their bondage.

That it would come down to this, God knew. He told Moses before he returned to Egypt and before he ever spoke to Pharaoh. He said: ***“Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the Lord, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, ‘Let my son go that he may serve me.’ If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.’”*** (Exodus 4:22-23) But though this sounds like a “tit-for-tat” from God - son for son, blood for blood - it is actually not. In reality, God is being quite merciful here. As He told Pharaoh last week, *“I could have squashed you and wiped you off the face of the earth by now”* - but He didn't. And what had Pharaoh done to God and His people? He had ordered that *all* their males babies be cast into the Nile and drowned. Not just the firstborns - *all of them*. Every one. Moses had been miraculously preserved; the Hebrew midwives saved many by not obeying Pharaoh's order. But if Pharaoh had had his way, the slaughter would have been much greater. A true holocaust of male Hebrew babies.

But that is not the way of it with God. Although He deals quite strongly with Pharaoh, still He shows His mercy. And, with this last and greatest plague, He is also pointing us to the ultimate mercy which He would show to the world - that through the death of His only-begotten Son, He would set us free from our bondage to sin, death, and the devil. He does not require your firstborn - He gives you His own. A truly incredible act of love.

And so just as the blood of the lambs that marked the wooden doorframes of God's people in Egypt caused death to pass them over, so now the blood of Jesus - the Lamb of God - that marked the wood of the cross causes death to pass us over. And yet it is not just His blood smeared on the wood of the cross, but His blood sprinkled upon us in the water of Holy Baptism, and His blood poured over our lips in Holy Communion, mark *you* as one redeemed by Christ the crucified. Redeemed - which means: bought with a price.

And the price was steep, wasn't it? We have heard all this Lenten season the story of

Jesus' Passion, and all that He did for you and me in laying down His life for us. From the agony in the Garden, to betrayal and denial by His friends, to humiliation and beating, and then as we heard tonight, to His being hung on the tree of the cross. And we see how devastating sin truly is. But sin will not have the last word; Jesus will. For His Word which started it all will end it all, and commence the beginning of the new creation.

Before they go, however, they are to eat. Not just any meal, but the very flesh of the lamb whose blood will save them from death. And this meal they are to eat on this very day every year, to remember who they are and what God has done for them. But not only to remember as a mental act, but to become participants in the story. Not by acting it out, but by faith. Faith which clings to the Word and promises of God. Faith which looks to God for all that is needed. Faith that finds hope and confidence in Him alone.

And now, so too do we eat the very flesh of the Lamb whose blood has saved us from sin and death. But how much greater our meal! For not only once a year - and *only* once a year - do we eat, but *as often as you do this*. As often as our sin oppresses us, as often as death threatens us, as often as the devil attacks us - we eat and drink the Supper of our Lord and become participants in His death and resurrection victory by faith. Faith which clings to the Word and promises of God, looks to Him for all that is needed, and finds hope and confidence in Him alone.

And so the exodus is complete. Israel's, and ours. Our Father has freed us from our bondage, and we are free - truly free - to serve Him. And a more joyous service there truly has never been, nor ever will be.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Office Hymn: "Lord, You Are Our Deliverer"  
Tune: King's Lynn (LSB #517)

1 Lord, You are our Deliverer,  
our only hope and stay  
against our cruel oppressor  
when we in bondage lay.  
You came in meekness lowly  
to crush the serpent's head,  
to free us from our slavery  
and raise to life the dead.

2 When God had shown His pow'r and might

one work yet still remained.  
The death of Egypt's firstborn  
release for Israel gained.  
The blood-stained cross of Jesus  
doth mark us as his own,  
that now we live in peace and rest  
and never are alone.

- 3 Then homage let us give to God,  
the Father, Spirit, Son.  
The same today and ever,  
th'eternal Three in One.  
Who saved us from our Egypt  
and slavery to sin,  
that we may live in freedom  
and heaven for us win.