

Instead of Me

Message #2 – “Sacrificed for Me”
Matthew 26:17-19

St. Paul’s United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown
March 7, 2021

Pastor David Woolverton

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Can you believe it’s been just about a year since the pandemic began here in Pennsylvania? It was mid-March last year when things got really tense. I remember there being so many unknowns related to COVID-19 that it was recommended that churches develop alternate plans for worship rather than in-person gatherings. Now, regardless of whether or not you agreed with that recommendation, you need to know something very important: Our church staff, leaders and teams of volunteers rallied together and within just four days did an amazing job!

1. We took our worship services completely online. God prepared us with just the right people, who had just the right skills, who could get just the right equipment – and we made it work. I am so incredibly proud of our staff, our leaders and our volunteer teams for what they accomplished. I’m humbled to work alongside them each and every day. Their devotion to the Lord and to this congregation and community are shown every day by how they have put their hearts and hard work out there. And the product of our online and in-person services over this past year has just gotten better and better and better. Don’t you agree?
2. In addition, starting pretty quickly in those early days of the pandemic, we mobilized teams of people to make personal calls to just about every member and attender of our church – especially those who were seniors – to check on them regularly, to offer prayer support and care support within what had been a very scary time. What a great gift it was to see our congregation rally to support each other.
3. And not only that, teams of people from our church joined others from other churches to offer meal assistance to families in need. Even in the midst of the fears of COVID-19, our people saw a need within the community and responded.
4. And through your generosity – of finances and time – we not only were we able to keep our church open and functioning well, but you enabled our witness to expand. Our services are being broadcast – both live and on-demand – to people all over the region, in fact, to other parts of the world! That means that people are accessing the good news of Jesus Christ who may not have even heard of St. Paul’s Church – or who may not have even felt comfortable coming into a church.

There are so many other stories connected to how our congregation stepped up and stepped into the chaos of the past year – and each one of those stories and each of the teams of people that those stories represent... they make me truly humbled – and proud - to be your pastor. Your level of sacrifice and commitment to the cause of Jesus Christ and to the mission

of out-loving the world underscore for me and for so many others what God's love can do to bring healing and hope into people's lives.

I remember at the start of the pandemic hearing the news media tell us that we needed to be prepared for quarantine. We really had no idea what that meant at the time, but we were told we needed to gather supplies to help our families in the event of emergency situations. Suddenly toilet paper disappeared. And so did Lysol and other cleaning products. There was a frenzy of fear-based activity that to this day has kept some products off the shelves at grocery stores. We didn't exactly know what to expect – so we tried to be prepared for anything.

Prior to this past year, I remember hearing about the need to prepare for major emergencies all the way back in August 2005 when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans. I remembered wondering – what would we do if we had to evacuate, and we had to do it quickly.

In truth, evacuations can be very difficult. Scary and difficult. Just like pandemics.

In fact, I looked up online what is recommended to pack when being evacuated. Here are some of the items that were suggested: ⁱ

1. Food and water for everyone in your household. Three gallons of water per person (more if you can) and at least a three-day supply of non-perishable food.
2. A change of clothes for up to a week along with personal hygiene items.
3. Infant supplies, such as formula or milk, bottles, baby food, diapers, and wipes, for those who had very young children. As well as other kid essentials for other children.
4. Items for your pets -- like food, water, medications, travel crates or cages, leash, and/or litter box and litter. Treats as well, if possible, since they too will be anxious.
5. Our medications. Pack a supply of prescription medications and eye care, if needed, such as contact lens solution and glasses.
6. We'll want to bring our driver's license, passport, health insurance cards, legal documents (birth certificates, social security cards, will, vehicle registration and ownership papers, marriage/divorce papers), financial records, such as bank account information, credit and debit cards, government benefits, retirement and investment account statement, tax returns, as well as copies of our insurance policies.
7. A battery-powered radio, extra batteries, and a flashlight.
8. Our cell phone and charger, along with some cash in case power is out in the area and ATM's are not available.
9. If we have time, we should pack valuables, family photos or other irreplaceable items, laptop computers, and the like. If we don't have room for computers, we can bring just the hard drive or a thumb-drive with our important data stored on it.
10. Don't forget a first aid kit with supplies to treat injuries.

A pretty extensive list, right? And that's all to evacuate for an emergency – with the sincere hope that you'll be coming back to your home when the emergency is over.

Now, I want you to think of a different scenario. Instead of an evacuation due to a pending emergency, what about evacuating because you and your family were finally allowed to leave a foreign land where you'd been held in bondage as slaves—all your life?

Think about this: The people of Israel were enslaved in Egypt for 400 years before Moses showed up and began negotiating with Pharaoh for their release. Most of us know that story

– or at least we have seen the Hollywood version of it in the movie *The Ten Commandments*. After a series of plagues, a critical moment would forever be etched into their memories (and ours): on a fateful night, the faithful Israelites put lambs' blood on the doorposts and lintels of their homes so that the Angel of Death would pass over their houses on its way to take the lives of the first-born children of Egypt—including the son of Pharaoh. Can you imagine? In response, Pharaoh relented. In a single moment, Pharaoh issued his decree to Moses and the people of Israel: *"Get out! Leave!!"*

They had little time to gather all that they could, all that they had accrued even within their poverty and slavery. And they exited their homes—for good. Even their food – their bread – had to be quick. Unleavened bread. I guess that was their very first experience of fast food.

That prior night... when the Angel of Death had passed over them... that was a time they would remember forever. In fact, God wanted them to remember what He had done on their behalf. From that time on, the people of Israel would remember "Passover."

Passover was about liberation. God setting His people free. In fact, the point of the entire Exodus was not only to liberate them, but to gather the people of Israel, as a free people, to worship God at some place that was yet to be defined. A new day had been realized. A freed people was to inherit a Promised Land. They were to live under the divine Lordship of Almighty God. *Yahweh, the Great "I AM," as He described Himself to Moses at the burning bush, would be their God and they would be His people.*

For generations since that time, **Passover was a festival** – a festival that remembered how God had set His people free from bondage. Through the years, it also had become a time that anticipated the coming of the Messiah – a day that they would be rescued again from all that held them in bondage.

Passover was also a meal. Every year on the 14th day of the month of Nisan in the Jewish calendar, specific items would grace the table in every Jewish household – items that symbolically helped them remember what life was like in bondage, and what God did that fateful night when the Angel of Death passed over those whose homes were covered by the blood of the sacrificial lamb.

Linked with Passover was another festival – a week-long festival that helped the Jewish people remember the Exodus. It was called the **Festival of Unleavened Bread**. Since those newly freed Israelites had no time to make bread with leaven (or yeast), they made unleavened bread – or Matzah, in Hebrew. The Festival of Unleavened Bread would begin with a thorough cleaning out of the house of any yeast, anything that had any type of dough – every cracker, every cookie, every roll, every crumb. What this festival did was two-fold:

1. It used leaven or yeast to symbolize sin, and
2. It symbolically helped everyone realize both how pervasive sin is in our lives (yeast is in everything, it seems) and how important – and yet seemingly impossible – it is to intentionally remove sin from our lives in order to honor our relationship with God.

The festival would begin with a Sabbath day and end seven days later with another Sabbath day. On that first and last day – no one would do any work. All preparations would be made in advance of those days so that God and God alone would be honored.

So much more could be said about Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread, but this gives you some background for today's Scripture verses. And this background is essential for us to understand what Jesus was about to do. Let's look at those verses in **Matthew 26:17-19** –

17 On the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Where do you want us to make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?" 18 He said, "Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, 'The Teacher says, My time is near; I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples.'" 19 So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover meal.

Let me make a few observations about these verses:

First, notice that Jesus says, "**My time is near.**" The word for "time" here in Greek is the word *Kairos*. For those who have been tracking with me for the past five years, you've heard me describe the difference between *chronos* (or chronological time) and *Kairos* (or the kind of time that reflects a season or an opportunity or even God's perspective of time). So, when Jesus said, "*My time is near,*" that meant that Jesus saw everything that was about to happen as *the opportunity* for salvation and redemption that God had been planning since the beginning of time. Think about that!

Also, the phrase "**is near**" in Greek is in the present tense – which means that Jesus was saying that the opportunity that God had appointed for Him was *at hand*. It's *here*. It's *right now*. In other words, Jesus is saying, "My time is now!" The moment that He had preached about in the very beginning of His ministry was now present and immediate.

Secondly, the Greek word for Passover is *pascha*. It's where we get the phrase "paschal lamb." The paschal lamb is the lamb that was to be slaughtered the day before Passover and then eaten on Passover in remembrance of the Exodus of God's people. Interestingly, as we read in John's Gospel, John the Baptist sees Jesus and says to his disciples, "*Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world*" (**John 1:29**). John's words were specifically talking about the sacrificial lamb whose blood was part of the atonement rituals of the Jewish religion. He's using that image to refer to Jesus. Talk about foreshadowing!

Third, notice that Jesus tells His disciples "Go into the city *to a certain man...*" You know what this tells me? It tells me that Jesus had a plan. He knew what He needed to do and He had prepared in advance for this moment. In fact, if we read through the accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, what we see is that God has had this plan from the very beginning. God has a plan. Did you hear that? God has a plan. Even when things look bad – He knows what He's doing. He's got a plan.

Fourth, Jesus was using these historic festivals of Passover and Unleavened Bread – festivals that celebrated liberation and redemption from bondage – symbolically, as a way to let the people know that a new "evacuation plan" would be ordered. Jesus would use the Passover meal to reveal the plan that God had for yet another rescue. This is the meal that Jesus would re-imagine for His followers, a meal that would become what we know as The Lord's Supper or Holy Communion. He would take centuries-old symbols that were used to remember what God had done in freeing the Israelites from bondage and *instead* use them to show how He Himself, as the Son of God, would save the people from their sins.

But this time, instead of using Unleavened Bread to remember how the Israelites had to evacuate in haste, Jesus Himself would be the bread – the “Bread of Life” as it says in John’s Gospel. The unleavened bread of Passover would become His body. The pervasiveness of sin reflected in the removal of all of the yeast from the house? . . . Jesus’s blood would forever wipe out the invasiveness of sin. Through Jesus’s blood God would set His people free from their sin -- forever. God’s sovereign saving rescue would come in the form of a Cross – and a suffering servant (**Isaiah 53**).

When reading the New Testament, most of us tend to gloss over verses like the ones we’re reading today. We normally go for where the real action is – the miracles, the healings, the casting out of demons. That’s who we are. We like drama. But these three verses are vitally important in telling us what Jesus was actually up to. By understanding their historic significance, we actually learn a very important spiritual lesson: **EVERY ACT OF LOVE COSTS SOMETHING.**

You see, **love sacrifices as it gives itself away.**

In anticipation of his visit to the church in Rome, the apostle Paul sends them a letter laying out the full scope of the gospel message—specifically, what he planned to teach them about Jesus. One of Paul’s main points is this: no one is deserving of salvation—not one; all people deserve death as a penalty for their identity in sin, all people stand in need of God’s grace, and the only one who can save humanity is God, which, Paul says, God has done through the crucified and risen Lord, Jesus Christ (**Romans 3:23–26**).

In the course of this explanation, Paul presents a grand mosaic that will define our understanding of salvation, the mission of the church, and how to live in light of the Cross of Christ for generations to come. It is a plan rooted in a new kind of hope.

In **Romans 5:1–5**, Paul writes, *“Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”*

This new “hope of sharing the glory of God” is what redefines the future for the follower of Jesus. That hope calls the believer forward through sufferings, through challenges, through persecutions, through hardships, in a movement empowered and directed by God’s Holy Spirit.

As followers of Jesus, and in light of His crucifixion and resurrection, we are first and foremost to be **purveyors of hope**. Without hope, without a vision of a future purchased by that hope, we wander around in life aimlessly, lost and without a sense of purpose. With that hope, however, we lead our families and communities into becoming places of justice, genuine reconciliation, and peace, and we do so inspired by the resurrection of Jesus Christ and its promise for all who are called by his name (**John 17:24**).

Hope, you see, gets people moving. The Israelites left their slave-homes in Egypt without knowing exactly where they were going—because they had hope. They were going to a new home.

Because we are followers of Jesus, every day we must point people to both the cross of Christ and the resurrection event and bear witness, by our actions, that *here and now* we hold to the hope of the life yet to come. A new home.

As followers of Jesus, we also need to ask God to give us a passion for other people to be set free from that which imprisons them *here and now*. This is critically important. Making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world must be our primary goal. Jesus did not die an excruciating death simply in order to make us feel good about ourselves. The love that God showed on the Cross of Christ moves people toward the life that God intends—a life of freedom, hope, forgiveness, love, and grace and release to the captive, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, and the proclamation of the Lord's favor, as Jesus announced in **Luke 4:18–19**. And that life is meant for us *now*. Jesus said, "My time is *now*."

So, I have a question for us:

How has the message of the Cross of Christ changed you?

To follow Jesus is to deny ourselves, take up His cross, and follow Him. We need to die to ourselves. Most of us within the privileged society within which we live have no clue as to what Jesus meant by this.

In truth, in Jesus, God has done for humanity – us – what we could not possibly do for ourselves. If we truly get out of our own way – out of our own first-world, entitled, consumeristic view of ourselves – and face the raw reality of what Jesus did for us, what he sacrificed for us, what he endured for us, we might actually be able to say, "thank You... thank You for the Cross." And then, we might actually be able to live our lives – here and now – as lives that have been changed by Christ.

Every act of love costs something.

Jesus's crucifixion reminds us that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself (**2 Corinthians 5:18-19**). By it, He inaugurated a new creation, a new day, a new Kingdom, a new rule, a new life, a new community made up of people, children made in the image of God, who are meant to live out Jesus's mission mandate until He returns. The Cross reminds us that one day, Jesus is coming back to evacuate us again. A new home is calling us.

Until then... what is love asking of you?

Let's pray our prayer together: **Lord, what do you need me to see, what do you need me to hear, what do you need me to know, what do you need me to do? I am your servant in Jesus's name. Amen.**

ⁱ <https://www.chubb.com/us-en/individuals-families/resources/emergency-evacuation-packing-list.html>