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Reading from the Old Testament: Exodus 12:1-14
Reading from the New Testament: 1 Peter 2:10

You have oft heard me wax monotonously of my Missouri roots, but I've never spoken about how we came to be in Missouri because I have little information on that outside of one account that makes for great party conversation but offers negligible polish for our reputation.

Martin Van Buren Harris, my great-great grandfather, was born near Nashville, TN and moved to Obion County, TN at the completion of his medical studies. His medical career was very short, though, because he was prone to fainting spells when he was under pressure. Martin's identifying characteristic was his ungovernable temper. As if to complement this, the identifying characteristic of his first wife, Isoriah, was a penchant for paranoia, exhibited in wildly concocted stories evolving from the most incidental of human encounters. Through Isoriah's paranoia, a turn of phrase would evolve into a raging tempest.

One Sunday afternoon, James C. Brown and his wife went to call on his sister unaware that Isoriah had invented quite a tale about her brother which she could not resist sharing with her time-bomb of a

husband. So, when Jimmy enters the house, Martin is waiting for him, his short fuse lit. Confronting Jimmy with words Jimmy wouldn't remember having said because he hadn't, Martin proceeded to stab him several times, not killing him but leaving him semi-invalid for the rest of his life.

Now here's where the story enters Bizarro World. Isorah dies, of natural causes, and within three years, Martin marries her niece, Martha. Romance? Not so much. Martha had been engaged to a Mr. Harrison, but the family considered him not their social equal and forced Martha to break it off. Sooo, since everyone in town was frightened of Martin Van Buren Harris, Martha decided to marry Martin to spite her parents, and curiously, to show Martin that no one was going to push her around. When Martin once interfered with Martha as she was disciplining my great-grandfather Leslie, Martha took the heavy end of a buggy whip and smacked Martin in the head with it, knocking him out cold.

So, here's where the story gets interesting. The happy couple decided to move their family to Sikeston, MO, and Martin went ahead of them to look for work and a place to live. Now, the train to Sikeston

made a stop in Charleston, MO and Martin ambled into the local saloon for a drink ... or two ... or, well, you start to lose count after that. So, Martin, all liquored up, managed to get on the wrong train and when the conductor later discovered the mistake, Martin Van Buren Harris, who they assumed to be just another drunk, was thrown off the train in Morley, MO. When he sobered up, Martin, being superstitious, figured there was a reason he wound up in Morley and that it would, therefore, be bad luck to leave. And thus, you now know how a main branch of my family tree arrived in Missouri.

“For all the saints, who from their labors rest?” I have colleagues who are fifth generation pastors; I worked alongside a church elder who was a third generation Harvard educated Judge; and my great-great grandfather stabbed his brother-in-law; and once when he complained about his wife’s coffee, she threw the coffee, the cup, the saucer, and the pot in his face.

Everybody has a family tree, filled with branches, knotholes and knuckleheads, hot tempers and cold hearts, petty jealousies and stubborn perseverance, kind spirits, complicated minds, generous givers, and parsimonious Scrooges. And let’s face it, whenever and

wherever families gather around calorie laden reunion tables, the family tree is there in the midst of them, shading the occasion with a strange mixture of laughter and tension, humorous tales and heirloom resentments. It's what the playwrights call tragicomedy. And yet, these arboreal repositories of crazy, no matter how dysfunctional they may be, still make the attempt to gather because of the unquenchable human desire to somehow form a family.

During the period of slavery in America, slaves were not allowed to assemble unless a white person was present for fear that they would form a community, a family, a nexus of fellowship, support, strength, and power. To keep the slaves separate, the slave owners felt they were able to maintain control, a concept that would probably be on page one of every slave owner's manual. Thus, when Moses is sent to Egypt to lead the descendants out of slavery, the *them* he was to lead out was not an organized, coordinated, structured, codified community. The Israelites were Israelites in that they were descendants of Jacob, whom God named Israel, but their identity as a worshipping community, a distinct people with a shared self-understanding was not yet formed. That process, that training camp would truly get underway on the night

and with the fast food meal prescribed in our text today. The Pesach/Passover instructions are both purposeful and practical. “Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household ... the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight ... 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 ... This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the Lord.”

Provision. Protection. Preparedness. In a way, the Lord’s instructions here share the tone and urgency of Florida’s Gov. Rick Scott this week as Irma roared toward America’s great peninsula. Direct. Clear. Emphatic. In the face of a storm, every city manager, police chief, hospital administrator, store owner, utility provider, governor, FEMA director, and of course, the indispensable, peripatetic, he-man meteorologist Jim Cantore are out there with rolled up sleeves presiding over efforts to organize, dispatch, and distribute whatever is needed to maintain order and protect populations so that communities may not only survive the storm but become stronger after the storm,

knowing that often, a disparate crowd of people only come to understand themselves as a community after surviving the storm together. Duh! I guess we need one another after all.

Hurricanes didn't threaten Thebes, Egypt but even in the desert chaos threatens. By the time the Lord is passing out emergency preparedness pamphlets, Egypt has been getting hit with tsunami after tsunami of gross – rivers of blood, flash mobs of dead fish, slimy frogs, biting bugs, crunchy locusts, not to mention a proliferation of pus; and evidently, the grim reaper is waiting in the wings.

“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 ... This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the Lord.” This isn't just an evacuation plan; this is an emancipation.

This disorganized crowd of slaves who share not much more than a long dead uncle and the experience of injustice are about to embark on a journey that will take them from slavery to freedom, from being estranged heirs to being a family, from anonymity to identity. The

menu for Passover will not just remind them of what God has done, it will allow them to claim who they are. The prescribed liturgy becomes a means of self-understanding. In this same chapter of Exodus, the Lord reveals how this will work. "When you come to the land that the Lord will give you, as he has promised, you shall keep this observance. **26** And when your children ask you, "What do you mean by this observance?" **27** you shall say, "It is the passover sacrifice to the Lord, for he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when he struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses.' "

Here, we see that in the Passover meal, the children of the children of the children of those escaped slaves along with all future generations would not just be remembering distant relatives, they would be claiming their identity and celebrating their own deliverance from all that would threaten them or attempt to enslave them.

Rabbi Shai Held, in *The Deepest Truth About God*, writes, "God's most fundamental self-definition in Judaism is not Creator of the World or Sustainer of All Flesh (though God certainly is both and infinitely more), but rather the "Lord your God who brought you out of the Land of Egypt to be your God" (Rabbi Shai Held, *The Deepest Truth About God*)

It is no accident that Jesus is referred to as “the lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the earth.” For the blood of the cross, signified in the wine of communion, declares that we, too, are delivered from slavery to freedom. We, too, for all our quirks, issues, wounds, failures, and faults, are given a shared identity in Christ here at the table. “Once you were no people, but now you are God’s people.” That’s how Peter’s letter puts it. Likewise, in Ephesians we read, “remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. **13** But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. **14** For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”

You know that period of life almost everyone goes through when you become self-conscious to the point of paranoia, obsessing over who is looking at you and what they are thinking or saying about you? I guess my great-great-grandfather, Martin Van Buren Harris, never got over it, though my great-great grandmother, Martha, did say that the three years Martin lived “after his conversion” were as happy as any

married couple could know. So, we've got that going for us. Anyway, you remember those days of social paranoia and how they coincided with the period when you were perpetually embarrassed by your family, those times when you just wanted to shout, "I'm not with them!" We tend to get over that, well, at least partially. I'll never forget the day we arrived to meet an aunt for lunch at a famous restaurant just a few miles from where my heavily imbibed great-great grandfather was thrown off the train. In fact, the aunt we were meeting was the widow of Martin's grandson. So, we see my aunt pulling into the parking lot, and my dad says, "Lord, I just hope she has her teeth in."

But, you know what? I loved that aunt. I cherish the memory of staying with her when my grandmother was sick, listening to her stories as we sat in the shade of the giant oak in her back yard. We were and are somehow a family. In the same way we gather in this place with all our quirks and peculiarities while others scratch their heads and ask, "Whatever the world for?"

Why? Because this is so often a scary world and for the most part we do better when we travel together than when we travel alone. The blood on the lintel and the blood that mysteriously tastes like grape

juice are signs that God believes this, too. Whether it is the journey of the Exodus or the stations of the cross, we are no longer strangers, we are not estranged, we are family.

We live in a culture of church shoppers, folks choosing churches like they choose restaurants, flitting from one to another when the service is too slow or the hours are inconvenient, the prices too high, or the server gets your order wrong or the patron seated near you is talking too loud. We fail to realize what Oswald Chambers observed, ““The day we find the perfect church, it becomes imperfect the moment we join it.”

Theologian Joan Chittister said, “It is one thing to speak kindly to an irritating stranger on Monday. It is quite another thing to go on speaking kindly to the same irritating relative, or irritating employee, or irritating child day after day, week after week, year after year and come to see in that what God is asking of me, what God is teaching me about myself in this weary, weary moment.” Jesus said to that restless, odd collection of disciples, “As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” Peace fertilizes the family tree when we realize we cannot customize our families, we can only acknowledge them and love them

for who they are and hope that by the grace of God they may, in their own quirky way, do the same for us. The same is true for the church. The Israelite slaves, the early disciples, your family, this family – It's not that we choose one another, rather it's God who chooses us, and it is through God's presence, intention, and will, that in spite of all our quirks, we can live for one another and for God as we embark on the journey ahead. Amen.