Set for Action—Ex 12:1-14

In the Jewish way of reckoning time, it is not the first light that marks the beginning of the day but first dark. Thus, the new day, from a Jewish point of view, is nearly upon us. That thinking may seem strange to us, but remember that in Genesis God created light in the midst of the formless, empty depths of darkness. We talk of a bright beginning, but our Jewish friends might ask us to think also about a dark beginning.

When Jesus and his disciples, all twelve disciples, gathered in that upper room on this night we commemorate, this Maundy Thursday, they gathered as the light left the sky, as the darkness gathered. That seems like a sign of the great darkness to come, tomorrow, and there is certainly at least some sense of that gathering gloom in what happens among those disciples there around that table that evening, as St. John recalls it. Remember that, for those disciples, the darkness was like a prelude to the light: the necessary starting point for the new day, the consecrated day of Passover.

Though they were unprepared for the way the darkness came to them later that very night, Jesus urges them all along to remember that a new beginning was also near. When darkness comes, remember: remember that God is at work in the midst of it, calling forth something surprising, something beautiful, something holy, something new.

What we read in Exodus is all about new beginning. God instructs Moses and Aaron—God’s prophet and God’s priest—that this month was to be the first month, the beginning of the year, the start of the annual cycle: thus, in one sense, Jewish people mark their years Passover by Passover, as we might, Easter by Easter.

If it had been me giving the instructions, I would have had the Passover celebrated on the first day of the first month—that seems logical, if we’re concerned about emphasizing beginnings. But God doesn’t think like me, and I’m so glad! God asks me, asks all of us to consider God’s choice, God’s instruction. The Passover will not be observed on the first day of the first month, but on the fourteenth day.

The reason has to do, again, with beginnings. Not only did the ancient Jews reckon their days according to the first darkness, so too, they reckoned their months. The word month shares the same root as our word moon, and this is a dim reminder telling us that our ancestors also, at one time, reckoned the months by the cycles of the moon. The new moon signaled for the Israelites the beginning of the month. By midmonth, in the lunar cycle, about the fourteenth, the moon is near its brightest, its fullest.

God arranges things so that creation lends itself to this feast of freedom, this feast of new life, this feast of new hope, this feast of divine glory that Jews know as Passover. Not only will God part the sea for Israel on its freedom journey;

He also gives Israel the moonlight by which to guide their steps. God makes sure that not one of His people will be lost along the way. Not one.

Each gathering of the faithful is to have its lamb. Little did those disciples realize, up until that night, that their shepherd was also their lamb. The Israelites were to keep their lambs four days, from the tenth of the month until the Passover, on the fourteenth. No explanation is given for this four day period. Some believe that the interval was meant to make absolutely sure that the lamb was entirely without fault or blemish, that the lamb would truly be a perfect sacrifice. The ancient fathers of the Church, who regarded the Passover as a foreshadowing of the events of Easter, our greater liberation, our cosmic liberation, those Fathers of the Church pointed to the four days between Palm Sunday and today, this day, this Maundy Thursday. Our victory parade, our funeral procession, has led us here.

Each gathering was to have its lamb. We have our lamb here, set before us on this table, the one lamb, the only lamb, though each congregation observing this holy occasion this evening has its own bread, its own wine or juice: by the Holy Spirit, we all feast upon the one lamb. One bread, one body.

God says His people are to consume this lamb at twilight, the end of the old day and the beginning of the new. In this new month, on this new day, in this new hour, we commemorate the new thing God does in Christ Jesus: our journey to freedom, to new life, to divine glory.

Now God instructs Moses to tell his people something that we would probably be very reluctant to do: the people are to take some of the lamb’s blood and put it on the wood of their doorways, over the threshold through which we enter and through which we leave. When the Israelites departed Egypt later that night, all of them had to pass through the blood of the lamb.

We, too, must pass through the blood of the lamb, and indeed, that blood must pass, mysteriously, sacredly, spiritually, through us, so that we may receive new life from that life given up for us.

In God’s instructions to Moses, it is clear that the Passover feast has the quality of something cobbled together from what was available: a meal of necessity more than choice. The lamb was to be roasted over a fire, the bread was to be unleavened, and the greens were to be those one might gather in the wild. This was a meal for a people on the move. The lamb was not to be boiled, which would have required time to obtain sufficient water, time to bring the water to a boil, which would have required having a cooking pot large enough for the lamb. No, the Passover was a feast for a people going, not a settled people, with wells and pots and ovens, with all the time in the world.

When Jesus and his disciples are gathered in that upper room, there is some sense of leisureliness, but also a sense of urgency, of time pressing upon them. Events were about to move quickly. There was someplace for Jesus to go, quickly. Three years’ ministry were going to be wrapped up in a matter of hours. The one who was with the Father in the beginning, who had been for untold ages, his life would be ended in a matter of hours.

Through Moses, God tells the Israelites that nothing of their feast shall be left over; whatever they do not consume must be consumed by fire, reminding us of the nature of this feast: it is a sacrifice, an offering to God. Offerings were a way for the ancient Jews to renew their relationship with God, to restore their relationship with God, to reaffirm their relationship with God, to show their gratitude to God. In our sacrifice of praise, of thanksgiving, and of self-offering, we, too, are restored to relationship with God; we, too, are renewed in relationship with God through the perfect sacrifice, which is always self-sacrifice.

The Israelites were toeat this holy meal ready to go. In ancient times, people would enjoy a feast reclining around a low table: it was very leisurely and relaxed, as a dinner party ought to be.

God’s people are called to celebrate the feast poised for action. Beloved, this feast set before us prepares us for action. Christ’s act for us calls us to remembrance that he calls us to act.

Christ teaches us to remember him as we partake of his body and his blood, this bread and this cup. What do we remember? Not only what he has done for us, but also what he is doing for us, and what he asks of us. Not only his priceless blessing upon us, not only his call to love one another as he has loved us, but also his call to share him with everyone: to reveal him, through your Christlike words and your Christlike deeds, to everyone. Through this Blessed Sacrament, Christ calls us to action. Through this Blessed Sacrament, Christ calls us to remembrance of God’s word to His Israel, “when I see the blood, I will pass over you.” I will spare you; my judgment shall not come upon you. You will be safe.

The blood marking that wood, that cross, is the sign of our safety. This blood, marking us, is the sign of our safety. We are safe, beloved, in Christ. As you are in Christ, so let him guide you, shape you. In humble, self-denying, loving service Christ came among us. Let us go out, in Christ, among all our neighbors in humble, self-denying, loving service. Christ is our new beginning. Christ is their new beginning. Let him put you into action, bringing him to them, bringing them to him. This is the mark of a disciple.

Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!