

Commentary on Exodus 10:12-12:31

Our lives are often marked by new beginnings.

For me, the calendar year naturally offers fresh starts in January and in August, when my children return to school. Likewise, the more I dig my hands into the earth, planting seeds and harvesting vegetables, the more the four seasons usher me into natural waves of stops and starts, of beginnings and endings alike.

The church calendar is obviously rife with new beginnings, at Easter and Pentecost and Epiphany, just to name a few—the ebb and flow of death and life, newness and celebration juxtaposed alongside seasons of remembrance and death.

Of course, this week’s reading isn’t all that different: following a plague of darkness, and a warning of a plague on the firstborn, God tells Moses and Aaron that “this month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for us” (12:2). A list of directives, including each household taking an unblemished lamb for four days before slaughtering it, marking the doorposts with blood, and eating it “roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs” (12:8), is given, along with even more instructions.

Passover would be a day of remembrance to God’s people, a festival celebrated throughout the generations. For “when your children ask you, ‘What do you mean by this observance?’ 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’” (12:26-27).

In chapter 12, we are privy to a new and different kind of story that distinguishes “the whole congregation of Israel” (12:3) by an identity shaped by this one people’s relationship with their God. As theologian [Justin Michael Reed](#) writes, “And every year, from this time onward, will begin with the memory of the moment when that relationship was inaugurated by God liberating them from slavery.”

For this is a story of the God who frees and the God who liberates. This is a story of the God who sets the captives free and the God who brings new life and new beginnings.

But our heads would have to be buried deep in the sand not to see the complexities that coincide with this week’s readings, for the God who makes all things new is also

the God who initiates death, who again hardens Pharaoh's heart, so that "he did not let the people of Israel go out of his land" (11:10).

What are we to make of this God? What are we to make of a complicated backstory, as biblical scholar Alphonetta Wines says, that "calls us to remember something we'd rather forget," a narrative that includes 400 years of enslavement?

Our lives are full of complicated backstories, some more prevalent than others. Our countries are full of complicated backstories too: in a U.S. context alone, we cannot forget a most recent 400th anniversary of the beginning of American slavery.

Likewise, we are not without pain when it comes to embracing and remembering the complication that pairs with the stories of our lives. I doubt God should be thought of as uncomplicated either, for we are reminded that "our desire to recognize God as the liberator in this text should not silence all the difficult questions that God's violence raises."

One scholar offers that "thinking about the divine violence in this chapter can also lead to deep reflections on humanizing those suffering people who are grouped together as villains in the story." We think of the Egyptian woman who rescued a crying baby named Moses from the river, who "decided to choose mercy and life in direct defiance against the power of the throne." What are we to make of her suffering cries on the night God spared the Israelites but did not save her people? Was hers a cry that despaired the loss of her own life or merely a lament for those whom she lost?

Either way, she remains a villain. And for us, I can't help but wonder about those we've inadvertently villainized and labeled as other—those we've called enemy and deemed unworthy of our love and affection.

How then are we to respond to such characters in our own lives?

Another theologian reminds us that in these chapters, God's redemption of God's people "is an experience that must not be forgotten. It must be remembered, because it reminds God's people who they are, and who is their God."

So, we remember. And just as we remember, we recognize that in the act of remembering, we hold a smattering of seasons, of death and life and everything in between. We remember that our God is not a static, one-sided, arbitrary God, but a

God made up of myriad complications, a God that is perhaps rather like the people who likewise call this God their own.

We sit in the madness and in the mystery, “not just acknowledging the wrong in the world and in ourselves, but birthing and embracing new things,” perhaps asking ourselves two questions in return:

What new thing is God then birthing in you? What old thing needs to die so this newness might come alive in you?

Perhaps this is the new beginning for which we long.