

March 13, 2016

Exodus 11.1-8, Exodus 13.11-16

Romans 3.20-26

Redemption language appears all over Paul, it is one of the words that Paul uses over and over again, trying to illustrate what Christ does for us. Along with words like justification, atonement and reconciliation, these words appear almost interchangeably throughout Paul's letters to various churches. These words revolve around what Paul is trying to express, the message central to what Paul is trying to convey, the Gospel. He uses these words which I think we often have no way of identifying with, which have lost most of their meaning to our modern ears. But I do not mean to imply that all of our Sunday School teachers are to blame for our ignorance of these words. They have simply fallen out of usage, and for good reason.

Redemption would have been a marketplace word, a word that Paul borrowed from the business world in order to explain the work of Christ in a unique way to his audience. A way that they would have easily been able to understand, but one that we do not find within our modern lexicon. It would have been most familiar to the ancient readers not just as a marketplace term, but more specifically as a word that denoted paying to free a slave. The word redemption would have rung in the ears of those who heard it as freedom for someone who was enslaved. It would have been the trumpet of freedom for those who were enslaved, announcing that the price of their slavery had been paid.

I want to begin with a story that I have no proper claim on, I would gladly claim it as my own but it will become very apparent why I cannot. This story is from Dr. Black, who teaches New Testament at the seminary. This strange, bug eyed, man from rural North Carolina, still has

that very thick accent and pacing that you would expect. So as I tell this story you will have to imagine, well basically the exact opposite of my own voice. He told this story about the Greenstamps. Do you know what I am talking about? From what I am told they would come with everything that you bought, groceries, gas and everything in between, and you would collect these stamps, saving them up in these booklets. Eventually, when you collected enough of these stamps you would take them to the stamp store in order to trade them in for stuff. So one day Dr. Black's Mom took him to the Greenstamp store, so that little Clifton could buy something with the stamps they had collected. She told him that he could redeem any toy that he wanted in the entire store. So young Clifton wandered throughout the store until he found this stuffed tiger, and he knew that was exactly what he wanted. He found a stuffed tiger that he just had to have, that he just had to redeem. So, using the stamps, he redeemed the stuffed tiger. It had been bought, freed from the stamp store, but even though it had been freed, there was no way that young Clifton was going to let the tiger go. It was not freed to wander the world, it was freed but still belonged to him. No one else was going to own it because, he had been the one to redeem it.

This story captures the nature of redemption, holding onto both the aspect of freedom from enslavement, and the subsequent ownership that continues to exist. As Paul uses words like redemption, he is not implying that we are completely free. We are people who have been redeemed by God, who continues to claim ownership, Lordship over us. Which is what brings us to our readings from Exodus. It is this redemption from slavery, which frames the final Exodus of Israel. As we finish up with the final plague, the Israelite people are about to be redeemed from their enslavement. They can almost taste their freedom, which has had a truly high cost indeed. The Lord has almost completed paying the price to release His people, not so that they

would be freed to wander into the world alone, but freed so that they could be the Lord's people and He could be their God.

We come to the last plague, which is going to redeem the Israelite people from their slavery. But as we do so, we do so with solemnity, acknowledging the grim nature of this final plague. While all of the other plagues inflicted upon the Egyptians sent the land into the UnCreation, this final plague is going to be the hardest to stomach, when humanity itself joins the UnCreation. All of the other plagues have been difficult but next to this one, the other nine pale in comparison. All of Egypt is going to feel the weight of this final plague equally, from Pharaoh himself down to the most humble slave. This final plague is truly difficult to approach, with the death of the firstborns from the firstborn of Pharaoh to the firstborn of the female slaves, we can be left wondering what kind of God is this? What kind of God would sacrifice so many to redeem the Hebrew people?

To truly understand what is about to happen we have to be specific about what word is being used. The words used in the Hebrew does not just mean all firstborns, which Pharaoh surely was, but specifically children, those who are young enough to have living parents. What we seem to be talking about is child sacrifice, and the clearer this implication becomes, the more difficult this passage becomes to grasp. It becomes harder to justify, harder to be a story that we tell to children. We end up approaching this familiar story with all sorts of justifications, we try placing the guilt of slavery on the Egyptians as a whole, but this becomes more challenging when we recognize just how young the intended targets are. There are no easy answers here, and thank God for that.

In our reading, the Lord announces to Moses that after this final plague is enacted, Pharaoh will not only let the Israelites go but will drive them from the land, they will not just be

released but be driven from the land. Even after the first nine plagues, this seems like a pipe dream. Moses tells Pharaoh that after this final plague the Egyptians will cry, mirroring the cry of the Hebrews which called to the Lord. The Hebrews will cry no more, but now the whole of Egypt will cry out in pain. They will cry out in mourning. Moses declares to Pharaoh that when everyone witnesses the death of the firstborn among the Egyptians, while the Hebrews remain unscathed, everyone, Pharaoh, the Egyptians, the Hebrews, the readers, will know that the Lord makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel. Everyone will know that the Lord has redeemed one by sacrificing the other. This redemptive story has taken a horrifying turn.

But suddenly the text takes a strange detour, we go from the pronouncement of the death of the firstborn of Egypt to instructions for the rituals of Passover. A yearly ritual, which not only commemorates the events but makes each participant part of the awaiting dawn of liberation. Each doorway becomes the paschal altar, staving off death, and preserving life, the doorframes receive the atoning blood for the Israelites. And for eternity this ritual will celebrate and reenact that the Israelite households were passed over, while the Egyptian houses were not. Maybe it is as Moses says, that God has drawn a distinction between Egypt and Israel. But this slight pause in the action is short lived as the text quickly returns to the slaughter of the firstborn children of Egypt. We return to the terrible images and cries of the Egyptians, suddenly given a collective voice to bemoan their afflictions. And we are again left wondering, what kind of God is this? Why should the Israelites be passed over while every household of the Egyptians becomes a mausoleum? Is there truly a distinction drawn between the Egyptians and the Hebrews?

I believe the answer that we are searching for is found in our second Exodus reading. In this reading we find a bizarre symmetry with the slaughter of the firstborn. In this reading, God

declares that all of the firstborn belong to Him, from the animals born to their livestock to their children. They all belong to the Lord, the Lord has taken them all for Himself. The firstborn children of the Israelites are not spared, they are not passed over, they have been forfeited to the Lord as well. While they may have been passed over by the destroyer, they have not been freed but forever belong to their God. In the paschal sacrifice on the original Passover, all of the firstborn are offered up as their own form of sacrifice. Indeed, all of Israel becomes the redeemed firstborn which God declares ownership of. And every time the Passover is celebrated, the people declare that they have been claimed by their God. They have been bought from slavery and are now enslaved to their God.

The text goes on to instruct Hebrew parents, that they should redeem their firstborn children. In the described acts of redemption for the firstborn children, the people are reminded of and take their place as those who forever belong to their God. Giving up to God, what belongs properly to God. These firstborn are redeemed through sacrifice, and the Levite priests take their place in service to the Lord, but they belong always to God. They continue to be the child Isaac, tied to the altar. In the final plague, all of the children, all of the firstborn, all of Creation is given up to God, all are claimed by God. There is no distinction between Israel and Egypt, one is not predestined for wrath, while the other is predestined for glory, all of them, all of Creation is claimed by God. The Israelites are not passed over for their holiness, the Egyptians are not condemned for their wickedness, they share the same lot, all are forfeited to God. But we are still left wondering, left looking for an answer to who is the God who would sacrifice the first borns in the first place?

For this answer, we must return to Paul, we must find within Romans meaning to their redemption. We must find within our Romans passage, God, who gives His Son, coequal in the

Godhead, the firstborn of Creation so that all Creation might be redeemed, so that all Creation might be bought from sin and enslaved to God. So that all of Creation might be forfeited to God. So that all Creation might experience the same Passover. Even though we have been enslaved to sin, and given over to the death that both the Egyptians and the Israelites are bound to in their own ways, we have been freed so that we may have life. God claims all of Creation, even the Egyptians, and redeems it Himself. We have been redeemed so that we can experience eternal life in the Christ Jesus, our Lord, who enslaves us to Himself. The same relationship that Dr. Black had with his stuffed tiger. This is the God we meet in Christ, and the God we meet in the Exodus. The God who is willing to sacrifice His own child, who predestined Christ to be for us, to be the one who experienced death, so we may be passed over, forever forfeited to our God. The God who claims all of Creation as His own firstborn through the death of the Son on the cross. God is not the one who sacrifices the Egyptians to free the Hebrews, God is the one who sacrifices Himself to free humanity. The price that has been paid for our redemption is nothing less than the life of Jesus Christ, who has bound us to the God who redeemed us forever. And this is Good News indeed.