

God's Freedom Flight

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Sermon Audio file

Scripture Text: Exodus 12:1-14

First came the Passover, then the Archer. Both are world-changing flights. In ancient times, God passed over the land of Egypt, struck down the first-born of the oppressive Egyptians, and then liberated the people of Israel from captivity. This powerful act of God was an unexpected divine innovation.

Today, the soon-to-be-released Archer vehicle can pass over the United States, fulfilling the dreams of all who have hoped to own a flying car. The Archer “looks like a space-age tadpole that’s sprouted spike-tipped wings,” says Fast Company magazine. It “can take off and land vertically, meaning that it doesn’t require a runway, and once it’s aloft, it flies like a small airplane.” Talk about an unexpected innovation!

Archer Aviation executives are developing a flying taxi service, one that will allow people to soar over highway traffic. If the Archer vehicle is purchased by airlines, you’ll be able to avoid the airport experience entirely. After clearing security, you’ll have the pleasure of Archering directly to your plane. The cofounder of this air vehicle company, a man named Adam Goldstein, believes that Archer will become a verb. Today, you can Uber to a meeting. Tomorrow, you will Archer.

Says Goldstein: “This is a whole new category that can literally change the world.” Flying cars are projected to be a \$1 trillion market by 2040. Goldstein and his colleagues are doing much better than the company that created a hybrid of a fly, a car, and a pet. Do you know what they made? A flying carpet!

There are certainly differences between the ancient Passover and the modern Archer. But both share the distinction of being world-changing flights. The flight in the book of Exodus took place when the LORD decided to pass over the land and “strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals” (Exodus 12:12). This was the judgment of God on the people and the gods of Egypt because they had oppressed the people of Israel.

Only the Israelites were spared, because they had followed the instructions of God and smeared some blood on the doorposts and lintels of their houses. “The blood shall be a sign for you,” said God to the people, through their leaders Moses and Aaron; “when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt” (v. 13).

This innovative flight took place as predicted, when God passed over and “struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the prisoner who was in the dungeon” (v. 29). Then, God’s action resulted in a second flight, one which took place after Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron in the night. “Rise up, go away from my people, both you and the Israelites,” Pharaoh said. “Take your flocks and your herds, as you said, and be gone” (vv. 31-32).

God’s flight over Egypt led to the flight of the people through the Red Sea. Together, these flights led to the liberation of the people from captivity. The people were ready for this trip, because God had given them instructions for how they were to eat the first Passover meal. “This is how you shall eat it,” said God: “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” (v. 11).

No doubt the Archer flying car will be very cool. But in terms of world-changing flights, it cannot compare to the Passover. Only the Passover has the power to change the world for all time. This mighty act of God launched the exodus from Egypt, in which God delivered his people from slavery and led them to “a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus 3:8). Throughout Jewish and Christian history, this event has been considered crucial to the life of faith, for it demonstrates God’s solidarity with the oppressed and his desire to liberate people from physical and spiritual bondage.

This liberating work is remembered whenever Jews celebrate the Passover meal, and whenever Christians gather for the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. According to pastor Thomas Mann, there is a specific way that celebrants of the Passover are supposed to dress for the meal: In “traveling clothes.” They do this because “the celebrants are about to embark on a journey to freedom, a journey taken by millions of predecessors for several thousand years, and yet a journey that is as personal and recent as the liberation of an individual soul from its own secret bondage.”

The flight of the Passover is a journey to freedom. It was taken by people in the past, and it is taken by people today. It is an exodus from political bondage, and an escape from personal bondage as well. It is a world-changing flight.

As Christians, we do not follow the biblical instructions to “take a lamb for each family” and “slaughter it at twilight.” We do not put its blood on our doorways and then “eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs” (Exodus 12:3, 6, 7, 8). But we do eat the bread of Christ’s body, broken for us, and we also drink the blood of Christ, shed for us for the forgiveness of sin. We follow the practice of the apostle Paul, who said that “Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed” for us. Therefore, says Paul, we can celebrate the festival “with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Cor. 5:7-8, ESV).

Because Christ is our Passover lamb, we can take a world-changing flight into freedom. We do this as a church community when we take stands on public issues of moral concern. In the 1950s, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church decided that it had a responsibility “to speak on social and moral issues for the encouragement and instruction of the Church and its members.” Over the years, it supported public school desegregation, equal rights for women, divestment in South Africa to help end apartheid, and a ban on landmines. These positions may have initially stirred up controversy, but they are now accepted by many – if not most – Christians in America.

One Presbyterian pastor, Henry Baumann, decided to travel with a church member to Montgomery, Ala., in March 1965. He wanted to hear the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King’s speech at the end of his historic march from Selma. “We wanted to be there,” he said, “and be part of the movement.” So, they put on their traveling clothes and made a flight to Alabama. At the time, supporting King and other civil rights leaders seemed to be in line with God’s focus on liberation, as well as a faithful response to the call of the biblical prophets to work for social justice and travel closer to the promised land.

Almost 60 years later, the challenge remains the same: To work as a church to free people from bondage, in line with the message of the original Passover.

God’s world-changing flight can also include liberation from personal bondage. Just as the Archer is a personal flying vehicle, the Passover can be understood as vehicle for personal liberation. When Jesus sat down with his disciples for the Passover meal in Jerusalem, he gave them a cup and said, “Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:27-28). His blood, like the blood of the Passover lamb, is poured out to free people from anything that oppresses them. In this case, it brings forgiveness of sin.

So, I ask you: Where are you feeling a sense of personal bondage? What is keeping you trapped, unable to experience the fullness of life that God desires for you? In what ways are you separated from God and from the people around you?

The Bible understands sin to be slavery. It is a bondage that separates us from God and from each other. Sin “is not the breaking of a rule,” says seminarian Jacob Sparks, “but rather slavery to oneself and separation from God and neighbor.” When you run down the list of the Ten Commandments, from “no other gods” to not coveting “anything that belongs to your neighbor,” you can quickly see that commandment-breaking is grounded in slavery to oneself and separation from God and neighbor.

Fortunately, Christ is our Passover lamb, and he has shed his blood to bring us forgiveness. The “good news,” says Sparks, “is that regardless of the sins we do or do not commit, Jesus Christ has destroyed sin and death, and we are no longer under the bondage of our sin and separation.” You are now free to put God first, because Christ has liberated you from captivity to yourself. You can now love your neighbor as yourself, because Jesus shed his blood to free you from bondage to sin and separation.

The Archer looks like it will be an impressive flying car, but not nearly as world-changing as the Passover, which continues to bring us liberation – as communities and as individuals. From the time of the exodus to today, God is always at work in innovative ways, to free us from anything that can enslave us.

In closing, I want to stress another important aspect of our scripture reading for today besides freedom – that of “remembering.” In doing so, we see how the importance of remembering the Passover for Jews also highlights the importance of remembering the events of 9/11 for Americans.

“This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord – a lasting ordinance,” Thus, we have the establishment of the Passover, one of the most important of all Jewish festivals. Every year since, and down to our own day, Jewish families have gathered at the traditional Sedar meal. The patriarch of the household asks the children, “What makes this night different than all other nights?” The youngsters respond with the Exodus story of God’s miraculous deliverance of their people.

Some things are important to remember. We understand that. I wonder if in any American home on September 11 anyone will ask, “What makes this day different from all other days?” We know why someone might. September 11 was a horrible day. Most of us can recall exactly where we were and what we were doing when we heard. We were glued to whatever television sets were handy. I have no idea how many times we saw the second plane fly into the south tower, or how many times we observed the unimaginable collapse of the twin towers.

Our national response was, for the most part, wonderful. We saw true heroism in the work of New York’s police and firefighters. On that tragic day we witnessed their courage and dedication, and it was a marvel to behold. And there was a wonderful outpouring of support for the victims and their families. Remember the long lines at the blood banks and the billions of dollars generously given to charities who would provide assistance? Indeed, Americans are generous people. We already knew that. And not only generous to our own; we are generous with the whole world, which is why the questions came later: “Why would they do such a thing? Why do they hate us so?”

One of the pleasant surprises of 9/11 was the flood of sympathy from around the world. Remember? Even nations we would normally not think of as friends stood in solidarity with us and condemned the attacks. There was a surplus of footage showing people from around the globe reacting with shock and horror strained through tears.

Remember? As the day wore on, the numbness we had felt at the first word of the attacks began to wear off. The tragedy was touching us at the very depths of our being. We heard the reports of phone conversations from the upper floors of the Trade Center towers, or the cell phone calls from United flight 93, not to express fear or anger, but simply to say, “I’m stuck up here; I don’t think I’m gonna make it ... I love you ... Take care of the children.” Hearing these, we were compelled to talk with our own families. We appreciated in a new way how fragile life really is. No doubt that is why church attendance took such a jump in the days following the tragedy.

Suddenly we heard again the words of today’s scripture text. God’s instruction to Israel about another world-changing day: “This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord – a lasting ordinance.” Why? To ensure that the nation remembers who it is and whose it is.

Remembering 9/11 can help us do the same: We remember we are Americans; we also remember we are Christians, and that says something about how to respond to attacks:

We are Christians who remember the Word of the Lord that says, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay”

(Romans 12:1).

We are Christians who remember the Word of the Lord that says, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink" (Romans 12:20).

We are Christians who remember the Word of the Lord that says, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21).

We are Christians who remember the Word of the Lord that says, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44).

Remembering 9/11: It is painful. But, by the grace of God, it is helpful, and it leads to our collective and individual freedom. Alleluia and amen!