

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Exodus 1:1-13

Sermon Title: "God's Renewal for a New Year"

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{SLIDE 1} The New Year always begins for us on January 1. It never changes from January 1. We will always start our new year on January 1.

The Chinese celebrate a New Year every year, and this time it is on the 28th of January. It is the Year of the Rooster. The Muslims observe a new year, but they have to wait until September 21 or 22 of this year to celebrate it. The Jews also observe a new year for their community, and it is known as Rosh Hashanah, or "the beginning or head of the year." It celebrates the anniversary of Adam and Eve coming into creation, but also understands their weakness toward sin. A shofar or ram's horn is sounded during this time – this is meant to awaken the people from their slumber of sin and repent. Each year on Rosh Hashanah, which will be on September 20-22, the Jewish people are supposed to exercise inner renewal and divine atonement, hoping for God to forgive the wrongdoings of the past and set a new path of righteousness for all. Of course, our New Year's Day, January 1, observes a lot of drinking the night before and suffering a

hangover through the next day.

But let us stick with this image of inner renewal and divine atonement. The admission of sin and the longing to be forgiven. The hope to come before God as broken people and then to walk away as restored people.

{SLIDE 2} God says to his people in Exodus 12, “This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you.”¹ God sets up a New Year for the Israelite people. They never really had a New Year before. They never really had a God. The only gods they knew were the ones that the Egyptians told them to worship. The Egyptians forced them to labor day in and day out, told them what to eat, told them how to live and act, and told them how to worship. Now, this new God – not really a new God but the one true God – reveals himself to the Israelites. He calls himself the God of their father Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This God has a connection with the people. This God wants the people to connect with God and God alone in a loving, close relationship.

God speaks with them about rituals and customs that they never knew about, not like the Egyptians do.

¹ Exodus 12:1-2.

God reveals to them how to worship, and not the way the Egyptians do. God gives the people a new year, a new calendar, not like the ones the Egyptians forced the Israelites to observe. “This month shall mark for you the beginning of months.” I am now your God and you are my people, and I am going to show you how to live as a chosen people. We will start with the first day, the first month, your first New Year.

{SLIDE 3} As we read on, we will note that the New Year that God creates for Israel in Exodus 12 begins with Passover, which is the time when the angel of death passed over all of Egypt and spared all the children of Israel. We just read that in our lesson today. But did we not say earlier that Rosh Hashanah is the first day of the Jewish New Year, and it marks the creation of Adam and Eve? Passover occurs on April 10 next year and goes until April 18, and we remember quite clearly that Rosh Hashanah, the “head of the year,” begins on September 20. So what is going on here?

For the Jews, the secular New Year is Rosh Hashanah in September. The religious/biblical New Year is Passover in April. The point here is not to argue who got in right and which is the real Jewish New Year. What is important is to realize how each

New Year Day is supposed to be observed. What is important is that each day is meant to bring people closer to God. They are meant to refocus their attention on God by offering their sinfulness to God, and then to explore that practice of inner renewal and divine atonement (atonement means to be brought together with God as one through God's loving forgiveness). We may learn from the Jewish New Year how to set our New Year on the right path.

{SLIDE 4} Since we have Exodus 12 opened to us, we will observe what happens with God and his people during Passover. We just said that the people of Israel did not have one God to care for them. Now they do. The God of all creation reveals himself to them and offers them a new life. We have a God who cares for us. We have a God who wants to be in our lives and governing our lives. We should desire God to be with us. We should desire God as much as God desires us, although God's desire for us is immeasurable, beyond imagination. This is where it all starts. This is how we begin our New Year, acknowledging that God is real and God means everything to us.

{SLIDE 5} And what does our real God do for us? Gives us new patterns. Offers us a fresh start and a fresh path to walk. The old has gone and the new is

here. Let us start the new calendar with the proper perspective. Let us begin once more with the right attitudes. God gives us a new pattern, and we enter into that pattern with devotion to God.

{SLIDE 6} God tells the Israelite people to procure a lamb for each household.² God makes sure that everybody has a lamb, and that it is the right shape and the right gender and the right color of wool. The people now take their lamb and kill it, which is something we might not want to do to a lamb. They sacrifice the animal, and they spread a part of its blood on the posts on either side of their front doors. The whole thing sounds macabre to us. Maybe such a thing would turn our stomachs, and we might end up refusing to do it. This is what God calls the Israelites to do. This is how God establishes a new relationship with his people and lays now the new pattern for their lives.

The whole ritual might have sounded strange to the first Israelites who received it. Kill a lamb and spread its blood over the doorposts. Why? For what purpose? We read that the angel of death will soon fly over the region, looking for the firstborn children to kill. God will send the angel, and it will wreck havoc over the land. Many families will experience a death

² Cf. Exodus 12:3-10.

like no other.

But again, the Israelites might ask, “Why?” Why have the angel pass over and why have blood all over the doorposts?

{SLIDE 7} Take a step back and see where the Israelites are coming from. They live under an old pattern set up by the Egyptians, led by the Pharaoh. We have said that the only gods the Israelites knew were the ones that the Egyptians told them to worship. The only lifestyle the Israelites knew was forced labor from day in to day out. They had to collect their own materials to build all the ancient structures of Egypt.³ The Israelites were told them what to eat, and told them how to live and act.

This old pattern was a sinful pattern, according to God. No body of people should rule over another body with an iron fist. No group of individuals should be forced to slaves away, while others sit back and enjoy the results. God saw Egypt, and saw a dangerous, sin pattern developed that God had to smash apart. God had to eliminate the old pattern and replace it with a new pattern, perfectly created by God.

{SLIDE 8} God tried to set a new pattern with the Egyptian, and especially with the main leader, the Pharaoh himself. God sent Moses and Aaron to speak

³ Cf. Exodus 5:10-14.

with Pharaoh, try to convince him that the old pattern wasn't working anymore. It never worked in the first place – God never created his children to bully each other about. Pharaoh never listened, so God sent the plagues to wake him up. Just when Pharaoh might listen, he would change his mind and let the old, sinful pattern remain. More plagues came. Pharaoh was adamant in not listening.

{SLIDE 9} Finally, everybody reached the tenth and most terrible plague, the death of all firstborns. This would get everybody's attention. It is a terrible thing to have to do. We might completely understand it – we might completely agree with it. God was going to end this old, sinful pattern in Egypt once and for all. If Pharaoh wasn't going to listen, then God would go to the oppressed, the Israelites themselves. God would set the new pattern of love and grace with them. God would give them the tools and the instructions on how to start afresh with this "new" God who loves them. Kill the lamb. Paint the doorframe with its blood. Be rescued from sin. Be made new in God.

There is an old Jewish tale that says that when Israel passed through the Red Sea unharmed, and yet the entire Egyptian army was wiped out by the waters, the angels in heaven celebrated God's great victory for his people. But God stopped them and would not let

them continue. God wanted the angels to mourn the death of every Egyptian in the Red Sea, because even they were God's children, although they never listened to God. It makes us wonder if the old tale also applies to what happened to Egypt when the angel of death appeared. There had to be much mourning for Egyptians and Israelites alike.

{SLIDE 10} The whole point of talking about the Israelites and Passover in Exodus 12 is to cause us to step back and look at this New Year God has given us. We may not sacrifice lambs like the Israelites did. The firstborn of every family may not pass away, as they did for many Egyptian families. We may, however, sacrifice our sin. We may sacrifice those things that bring pain to others, that cause us to doubt our worthiness in the sight of God, that create a wide chasm between us and God that we can never cross. We may sacrifice those things that, quite frankly, go against what God wills for our lives. God never meant for us to live the ways we have been living, such ways that might have become too comfortable for us in the last year. Our so-called comfort doesn't draw us closer to God. Our sin draws us away, and we do not grow spiritually, and we do not understand our purpose in live more clearly.

In this New Year, God wants us to speak of new starts. God wants us to talk about this new calendar year and how God is going to be a part of it more so than the last calendar year. God wants us to consider inner renewal and divine atonement: how may we worship with more joy, how may we study with more desire, how may we serve with more generosity, how may we grow closer to God with greater thanksgiving? That is what God want us to talk about. That is what God wants us to have in our minds for this New Year.

{SLIDE 11} We may not sacrifice an animal for our sin, but we may sacrifice our desires, our wishes, our yearnings to God, especially if that are self-centered, painful, and destructive. We may approach God with our sinfulness, knowing that we shouldn't be able to approach God. We may speak with God knowing that we should not be able to speak with God. God is so perfect and holy and we are not. Yet, our God is not a God to keep us at a distance. Our God is not willing to remain perfect and holy without causing us to become perfect and holy through God. God calls us to approach. God wishes for us to speak. There is a new year and a fresh start ahead of us. Let us take the next steps with God, and be transformed by God's divine power.

The Assurance of Pardon:

The psalmist reminds us in Psalm 40 the theme of redemption: “I waited patiently for the Lord, who inclined his ear and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the desolate pit, out of the muck and mire.” Through Christ, God the Father sets our feet on solid ground. Through Christ, the Holy Spirit puts a new song of love and peace in our mouths. Through Christ, we see and fear God, for we are all forgiven. Thanks be to God! Amen.