

“The Backstory Matters”
Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14

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There’s an old story, a joke, I’m sure many of you know it, about the young newlyweds who were cooking a pot-roast. Very exciting. Their first pot-roast as a married couple. One of them, without asking, cuts the end off the pot-roast before putting it in the roasting pan. “Why did you do that? Why did you cut the end off the pot-roast before putting it in the pan?” “I don’t know. It’s what Mom always did.”

The next time they went to those parents they asked, “Why did you always cut the end off the pot-roast before putting it in the pan?” “Because otherwise it wouldn’t fit. My roasting pan was too small.”

It’s an old story but there’s a good lesson in it. After they learned why they were doing what they were doing, the couple realized they didn’t have to keep on doing it. Learning the backstory mattered.

When my wife and I were first married and we were working in the kitchen, I had a habit of leaving the cabinet doors open. Never thought to close them. My wife made many comments to me, some kind and loving, and some very heated, about closing them. And then, my mother came to visit. When she left my wife observed, “Now I know why you leave the cabinet doors open all the time. Your mother does the exact same thing.”

I don’t know that I quit leaving the cabinet doors open, and I don’t remember that my wife became any more tolerant. But we at least both knew the how and the why, and it helped. Knowing the backstory made a difference.

When I arrived at my first interim church, the congregation was very anxious over when I would leave. “How long will you be here? How will you know when it’s time to leave?” Give me a break, people. I just got here. Why the anxiety?

Eventually, I learned the backstory. The previous minister had started worship one Sunday when he stopped and said to the congregation, “Just to let you know, I’m retiring 30 days from today.” That was it. Hadn’t told the session or the Presbytery. Hadn’t dropped any hints. Just, BOOM! Thirty-days and I’m gone.

That was a good thing for me to know. It helped me reassure the congregation, and it helped me leave in a healthy way. Knowing the backstory made a difference.

The Passover festival always points backwards. It points back to God freeing the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt. Knowing what God had done for them, remembering it so well, helped the Israelites trust God was with them in the present. Knowing the backstory of their freedom allowed the Israelites to be confident God was with them in the here and now.

By the time of Jesus, 1200 years have passed, and the details of the festival have changed. But it’s still pointing backwards to the Israelites’ release from their enslavement. Jesus reworks the Passover meal, so he becomes the sacrificial element, and we remember what he has done.

When we celebrate Communion, we are looking backwards to Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross. But we are also looking back to how God has been present with us, and how God was present with the Israelites. In fact, we are looking back to creation itself and God making us out of love and loving us into living. We begin, by looking back.

Like the Israelites, being aware of how God has blessed us and sustained us in the past gives us confidence to look ahead to the future. In Communion, we are confidently looking ahead to God

sustaining us in the days to come. Because we know the backstory, we are confidently looking to the future.

But Communion doesn't just point us to the past and to the future. Communion is also pointing us inwards to self-examination. Are we resisting God? Do we know our backstory well enough to trust God is actively involved in our lives right here, right now? Are we aware of how God is acting in our lives?

Communion, also, is not just about us. It's not just about our own past and present and future. Communion is pointing us towards the heavenly realms. For just a moment, the Communion service is lifting us up into the heavenly realms where we feast with the saints on the love of God. Communion gives us just a taste of the joy of the life to come.

Finally, Communion is teaching us God's goodness is not limited to just a few. Communion is pointing outwards, and pointing us outwards, towards the church and the world.

Each of these arrows, each of these directions, matter. Communion is not really complete until all five have been incorporated into our living and our ministries. But in each case, we begin by grounding ourselves in the beginning, by grounding ourselves, our ministries, our Communion service, in the backstory. We begin by grounding all God's goodness in God's loving initiative in creation; in God's watch care over the people of Israel; in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus; and in God's loving Spirit with us.

We don't jump up and start sharing how great the future is going to be or the joy of being lifted up into the heavenly realm. We don't begin in the middle. We begin at the beginning. We begin by grounding ourselves in the backstory of God's love for all humanity. We begin with the backstory, because the backstory matters. Amen.