

But Don't You Believe It

**A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on September 6, 2026
Covenant Presbyterian Church**

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, "This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn with fire. This is how you shall eat it: 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. I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, from human to animal, and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

"This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance."

(Exodus 12:1–14, NRSVue)

I'm a child of the 80s, and it doesn't take much time on 103.7 to send me back there. A few notes from a song I haven't heard in years, and suddenly the distance between then and now grows strangely thin. So, the other day, driving along, when Bruce Hornsby came on with his classic "The Way It Is," that signature piano began rolling out of the speakers, bright and restless, and for a few minutes I was back to my formative senior year of high school.

It really is a remarkable song, as the piano seems almost to lift off the ground, while the words keep looking hard at the people the world has left there. Hornsby begins with a line of folks waiting for public assistance, while another in a silk suit passes judgment from a comfortable distance:

*Standing in line, marking time
Waiting for the welfare dime
'Cause they can't buy a job
A man in a silk suit hurries by*

*As he catches the poor old ladies' eyes
Just for fun he says, "Get a job."*

The song then evokes a world still bound by racial barriers that persist even long after laws are changed:

*Said, "Hey little boy, you can't go where the others go
'Cause you don't look like they do"
I said, "Hey, old man, how can you stand to think that way?
Did you really think about it before you made the rules?"*

And over that world as it is – as it may inevitably *seem* to *be* – falls the refrain:

*Well, that's just the way it is
Some things'll never change
That's just the way it is.*

We've heard that before, haven't we? We hear it – or use it – when something has been around so long that it no longer seems to require explanation. Why does the system work this way? Why do some people seem to carry so much more of the burden? Why does money move upward so much more easily than downward? *Well, that's just the way it is.* The words are almost narcotic, making a very *humanly* constructed arrangement feel like a law of nature. And eventually, we may even stop noticing because we've lived inside the walls so long.

But Bruce Hornsby knew better than to just let it go. You may know that the refrain doesn't end there:

*Well, that's just the way it is
Some things'll never change
That's just the way it is
Ah, but don't you believe it.*

Don't you believe it! Because it doesn't have to be this way. *Another way is possible.* And if we can hear *that*, we are getting very close to the spirit of Exodus. Because Pharaoh has built an entire *world* around the idea that such a world is just the way it is. Israel has lived inside it for generations.

Their bodies bend over mud and straw. Their hands shape bricks for the store cities of Egypt, immense monuments rising toward the sun, proclaiming the invincibility of an empire that expects to live forever. Above are walls and gates and the polished evidence of Egyptian greatness. Somewhere below are the enslaved whose lives are being ground into the mortar.

Pharaoh has even learned how to make their oppression feel like a *moral judgment*. When Moses first asks that his people be allowed to go into the wilderness and worship, Pharaoh

makes the labor *harder*. No more straw will be provided, but the quota of bricks will *remain*. The people scatter desperately through the fields gathering stubble, and when they fail, as they inevitably do, they're told that they're *lazy*. So, there it is. The burdens pile on, and the exhausted are *blamed* for *being* exhausted.

But Pharaoh's deepest power is not, finally, even his ability to demand bricks. It's his ability to make the brick yard seem like all that is. Morning means quota. Evening means exhaustion. Tomorrow means waking up and doing it all over again. Children can look at their parents and see the future waiting for *them*. That's just the way it is.

But don't you believe it, for there's one thing Pharaoh doesn't count on. In the twelfth chapter of Exodus, while Pharaoh still sits upon his throne and his whole world appears unbreakable, God says something astonishing to those being broken: "This month shall mark for you the beginning of months." *The beginning. A new beginning.*

Understand where Israel is when God says this. They are still in Egypt. No sea has opened. Pharaoh has not vanished. No one has yet taken one free step on the far shore. The brick yards will still be there when the sun rises. And God tells this people to start the calendar over! Pharaoh has arranged the world so that tomorrow can only replicate today: another quota, another year, another life, another generation comes and goes. But now *God* speaks into that closed future and says, *Begin counting again ... begin even now* in the very midst of this old world!

And then God does something more intimate than changing the calendar: *God sets a table*. In every home, a lamb is to be prepared. Bitter herbs are to be gathered. Bread is to be made without waiting for it to rise. Families will draw together as darkness settles over Egypt, and they are told to eat with their clothes gathered for travel, sandals on their feet, staffs in their hands. Eat like people who are *going* somewhere!

Just imagine the strangeness of it! They are still enslaved, but they are eating like travelers. Their feet have not crossed even the threshold of their own front doors, but their sandals are tied. Pharaoh goes to bed believing tomorrow morning belongs to him, as mornings always have, while inside Hebrew homes people are gathered around tables with staffs within reach because God has told them there is a new future on the other side of this night.

The night itself, of course, will be terrible; the book of Exodus gives us no sentimental story of liberation. There will be death and grief, danger and fear, and beyond Egypt there waits a wilderness that will expose how deeply slavery has worked its way into the people themselves. They will walk out of Egypt in a night, but Egypt will travel with them into the wilderness. Fear, scarcity, even the old longing for what was familiar will cling long after the brick yards are behind them. Yet before any of that, something has shifted that Pharaoh cannot undo: he no longer owns the future.

And perhaps that's why God tells Israel to eat this meal again and again, year after year: "This day shall be a day of remembrance for you." Children born long after Egypt is gone will sit at tables and taste the old story. They will remember that there was once a world so enormous and so deeply established that there seemed to be nothing beyond it. And yet, God opened a way. Memory becomes a way of refusing to let the present close over the future ever again.

There is something in that worth hearing on Labor Day weekend. Scripture itself knows the *dignity* of work: farmers and builders, shepherds and artisans, women kneading bread, fishermen casting nets. Good work can call forth gifts within us and bind our lives to the well-being of others.

But Exodus also knows what happens when work becomes *Pharaoh* – when the worker begins to disappear behind the work; when the people with the least control over their lives are expected to bear the greatest burdens; when even two jobs can still leave a household one emergency from the edge. It knows what happens when labor takes up so much of a life that there is barely enough life left around it.

And the voice of Pharaoh can move, too, inside those of us whose labor is far less precarious. A full calendar may feel like evidence that our lives are important. Usefulness and identity become tangled together so tightly that illness, retirement, disability, or simply growing older can raise the frightening question: Who am I when I cannot make as many bricks?

Later, in the wilderness, God will answer Pharaoh with Sabbath. One day in seven, Israel is commanded to let the tools lie where they are and watch the sun go down on unfinished work. Deuteronomy reaches back to Egypt to explain why: "Remember that, once, you were a slave." It is not for a slave to decide that enough is enough, for Pharaoh's bricks are never finished. But a *free* people can let evening come, bless the completed day as a gift, and discover that the world continues turning without their constant labor. Sabbath teaches with the rhythms of time what Passover teaches at the table: human life is infinitely more than what can be extracted from it.

Centuries later, when Jesus comes out into Galilee announcing the kingdom of God, his first great proclamation is also about time: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near." He says this while Rome is still Rome. Caesar still commands armies. Herod still sleeps in a palace. Crosses still stand beside imperial roads. Yet Jesus speaks as though another future has already begun entering the world.

And then you begin to see it wherever he goes. A woman bent toward the ground for eighteen years stands upright. People who have lived as outcasts, untouchables, feel healing hands upon their skin. Those whose very names have become reminders of failure hear themselves called daughters and sons. Hungry people discover abundance in the wilderness. People pushed away from respectable tables find themselves seated beside Jesus. The kingdom comes near as lives begin opening toward futures the old world had closed.

And then, when the shadows gather around Jesus himself, he too sits down at a Passover table. Jesus himself has been formed by this story – the long memory of a people whose God hears the cries of slaves and opens a future where none can be seen. And on the night he is betrayed, with Rome's machinery of death already beginning to turn, Jesus takes bread into his hands. He gives thanks. He breaks it. He gives it away. And he takes a cup. *Remember.*

Later, the Apostle Paul will tell the church that whenever we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim the Lord's death "until he comes." *Until he comes.* That phrase keeps remembrance from becoming nostalgia. We look back to Jesus Christ crucified and raised, but the meal itself leans *forward*. It carries within it the promise that what God began in resurrection is not finished yet.

In that sense, there is a deep kinship between this table and the one in Exodus. Israel ate while Pharaoh still looked eternal. The church eats while the world still presents us with plenty of reasons to believe that violence will keep breeding violence, that wealth will keep gathering where wealth already is, that some lives will always be made smaller so others can remain comfortable, that grief and death are simply the fixed boundaries of human existence.

And after enough years of watching the same cruelties return in different guises, enough promises broken, resignation can begin to masquerade as wisdom. We learn to lower our expectations of what we can become and what God might yet do. We look at the world, with all its stubborn evidence, and hear the old murmurs rising again: *That's just the way it is. Some things will never change.*

Ah, but don't you believe it – *for Christ sets a table here, in the midst of that very world!* Bread is broken; the cup is shared; and what looks so small carries a promise larger than all the powers gathered against it. The empire could not hold the one it crucified. The grave could not hold what was placed within it. And so, this table stands as a quiet contradiction of every voice that confuses what is, with what must be.

The night has not ended. But here, at this table, *the new day has already begun* – to the glory of God! Amen.