



LESSONS for LIFE

April 20, 2008 7:00 p.m

PASSOVER

JUST IMAGINE – 1980 TO THE PRESENT

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Today is the first full day of Passover which began last evening. Passover has been historically a very important Jewish tradition and it's celebrated also in many Christian churches. Passover is a time to look back and recall when the people of Israel were in slavery and bondage in Egypt and where God called Moses to lead them out of bondage into freedom; and just like the song we just sang, I woke up this morning with my mind set on freedom. That's nice but it's not good enough; to have your mind set on freedom but to have your backside set in slavery is not enough. The people of Israel – if they'd stayed in Egypt and had their mind set on freedom - it would have been a nice thing but it wouldn't have made any difference. In order to be free you've got to listen to the third verse: walk, walk. You've got to walk with your mind set on freedom. You've got to get out of the place of slavery and move into the place of freedom. Passover is a time when we look back and remember slavery; and we remember that there was someone called Moses who said to the people of Israel, *It's time to walk out of the slavery. It's time to get out of this place and move into freedom. It's time to take the first step.* So Passover is a time for us to look back and to think of those places of slavery and those movements towards freedom historically. Obviously, in addition to the people of Israel we think of the movement from slavery in North America, we think of the movement of slavery in other parts of the world, but we also think of the movement from slavery to freedom for each one of us individually; and each one of our own stories is different. The place where you're sitting in the midst of slavery may be called addiction. It may be called inertia; it may be called an unhealthy relationship. It may be called lots of unresolved issues and the call is 'yes', have your mind set on freedom, absolutely, but start walking. Start taking that first step out of that place. Now the difficulty is, sometimes the most unhealthy places for us are the most comfortable, the most familiar because we're used to them and so we want to stay there. It's very easy to stay there in that unhealthy place. It's scary to take a step. It's scary to name the truth and to begin to walk in the unknown; but God calls for no less than that from us. Jesus said, and you know this, *I have come that you might have life and that you might have it more abundantly.* He didn't say, *I've come just so that you might scrape by, get by, get through another day...* That's not the purpose. That's defeating why He came. A miserable existence is not God's will for your life. Walking around with this cloud over your head all day long: *Oh, how are you?* Sometimes I'm terrified to ask that question of some of you because I know that the list is going to come out: "this is wrong, this is wrong, etc. and I hear all the things that are wrong in my life – and this is why I'm going to blame everybody else and I'm going to blame God for it." Have your mind set on freedom and take the steps to begin that journey. So Passover is a time to look back, to recall that ancient and familiar and necessary movement away from slavery into freedom. Passover is also a time for us to be reminded that there are many occasions in our lives when we are going to face a fork in the road. We are going to come to that place and we're going to have to make a decision and we can cop out and go back to the familiar and stay stuck in the unhealthy places or we can make a decision to hear the words of Jesus: "Come and follow me and I will make you fishers of souls. Follow me and I will involve you in a life-changing



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endeavour that will change you forever and people around you forever. Come and follow me.”
A fork in the road, key moments and taking that first step.

And so Passover is an annual time to remember those things and to be challenged ourselves about that theme. Key reference points: Tomorrow night we are going to have our annual Seder supper in the social hall. There will probably be around one hundred folks in there. How many of you have been to a Seder dinner before? (A number of people – about 30 - raised their hands). It’s a wonderful, powerful experience. You know I think one of the gifts the Jewish faith brings to other faith traditions is that gift of reminding us to look back and see how the hand of God has been at work in our midst. This year is our thirty-fifth anniversary as a congregation. How many of you are younger than thirty-five? (A considerable number of congregants raised their hands). Shut up!! (laughter). Someone very rudely said to me this morning – I think it was one of you – but I won’t look at the person, “Oh, when this church was started thirty-five years ago I was three months old.” I wasn’t. It’s our thirty-fifth anniversary as a church and so, as we celebrate Passover, I think it’s a wonderful opportunity for us also to look back and to take a look back at our history and some wonderful moments, some powerful, difficult scary moments in the life of our church. What I did this morning in our service was I started to pull out one of my favourite scriptures, one that Sandra read for us from 1st Peter, chapter 2:

Once you were not a people but now you are the people of God.

It doesn’t say this, but if I were to edit it I’d say, *Once you had an excuse but you didn’t know. Now you don’t have an excuse.* Once you were not a people but now you are the people of God. So I went through my sermon file. We file all my sermons by their main scriptures and so I was going through the file and Robert and I were pulling out all the times I’d preached on 1st Peter chapter 2 and it was really funny because it was at many different crucial moments in the life of our church and so I said, okay, I think I’ll do a little visit down through history based on those sermons and what was happening at those times. So, a quick summary of the sermon this morning: Founded in 1980 on April 20th, 28 years ago today I preached on this scripture and it was the first Sunday service of our church in London Ontario. I’d been down there for months helping them to found a church there and this was their first Sunday service. I preached about the founding of our denomination in Los Angeles and Troy Perry, a Pentecostal Minister who was kicked out of his church for being gay had felt God’s call to start a church for those who’d been kicked out and who would be welcomed back home. I talked about Bob Wolfe, who was the founder of the church here in Toronto and how he came from Sacramento, California in 1973 with a one-way plane ticket and an invitation to come and start a church here. I talked about us becoming part of a denomination of over 200 Metropolitan Community churches in 28 countries around the world. And we looked back and thought about how scary it must have been in those early, early days. The next time I preached on it was in 1991 on November 10th when we dedicated this building as our church home. I talked about that journey for our congregation from worshipping in offices and bars and worshipping in churches that sort of wanted us but didn’t want us and worshipping in places that really welcomed us; to the purchase of our first church home – an amazing step of faith. We put in an offer and a down-payment. We had to raise \$100,000. in six weeks. We had no money in the bank and we just made it and then for many, many months afterwards every month it was tight making the mortgage payment, but every month it came. Sometimes it would be a cheque in the mail that day that we weren’t expecting which helped us to pay the bills. In talking about how we came to this place I talked of



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how, in 1996, May 5th, I used this scripture to talk about family values. I'd just returned from Ottawa where I'd been included in the debate about sexual orientation in the Human Rights Act. It was just after Bill 167 was defeated and we'd tried to get recognition for GLBT relationships and to make sure that their kids wouldn't be taken away from us when the birth parent died because the other parent had no standing in law. And to make sure we could visit our partners in hospitals, because up until then – if you were GLBT and in a relationship for no matter how many years – no matter how many documents you had, if you went into hospital the family could refuse you entry in an emergency because family were recognized as legal next of kin. There were awful, painful episodes where people were denied access to their partner when their partner was dying. So we talked about those battles and the struggles.

One thing I didn't talk about this morning was how, in 1986 when Bill 7 was being debated and that was the first Bill in Ontario to include sexual orientation in the Human Rights Act and we were getting hammered in rural Ontario by the fundamentalists and by the Catholic Bishops and the Premier of the Province of Ontario, David Peterson, sent a message to me from the head of the Human Rights Commission Warden Purcell, and he said "Call Brent and tell him we need help. Get some religious support organized." Warden Purcell called me and we hired a young woman and I said, "Here's the name of seven or eight clergy who I know would support this Bill. Call them. Get their names on a petition," and she called and called and called and we got 125 names of religious leaders across the Province of Ontario and we delivered that petition to the desk of all the members of Parliament on a Monday. By Thursday the Liberal government announced they were going to support the Bill and years later David Peterson would say that it was because of the petition of this church who'd gathered together that religious support that made it possible for that legislation to be passed. Once we were not a people; now we are the people of God.

And so that brings us to a more modern history and something I want to share with you tonight from our history is that on December 10th 2000, Human Rights Day, International Human Rights Day and I stood before the congregation and I announced that beginning in 2001 we would start marrying gay and lesbian couples because the Ontario Marriage Act, under the section called the reading of the banns – and you can get married two ways in Ontario. You can get married either by going to the City Hall and getting a marriage license, which is the way most people do, and we were refused that; or you can get married under the section called the publication of the banns. Now, 50 years ago, if your parents or grandparents lived here in Ontario, that's probably how they got married. They would go to their Pastor and say they wanted to get married and the Pastor would get up in church on a Sunday, three Sundays in a row, and say, John and Mary are getting married. Does anyone know of any lawful reason why they may not? The Act says the lawful reasons are: they are already married; they're related to each other; one is under age or one of them is unable to make the decision because of mental disability. And so the Pastor would make that announcement and if anybody had any objections they couldn't get married, but if there were no legal objections then the Pastor married them and issued the marriage license on behalf of the State and that section of the Ontario Marriage Act said, *Any two PERSONS*. It did not say male and female. And so our lawyers said, "Brent, I think you can marry gay and lesbian people." And so I said, "Okay, let's go." I went to our Board of Directors and they said yes and we made the announcement and the media caught the story and the next Sunday we read the banns for Ann and Elaine and Kevin and Jo, and there were no objections. Huge applause! How many of you were here that day? The media carried it and



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the next day there were objectors. I knew there'd be objections that day and to his credit the late Ken Campbell, who had been one of the objectors to GLBT rights, called me and said, "Brent, I'll be at church on Sunday. I just wanted to let you know I'm coming." I said, "Ken, I expected you." So, he came to church that Sunday and when I asked if anyone had any objections he stood up and said he objected because the Bible objects it. Someone else did the same thing and I said, "Well, I appreciate your objection but it's not a legal objection and we'll continue with the marriages." The next Sunday the same thing happened, same ruling and then on January 14th 2001 the first gay and lesbian couples anywhere in the history of the world were legally married right here on this spot! (applause). The night before, because of the death threats, and the police came to us and there were a number of death threats, most of them in the name of Jesus. Most of the death threats came from the religious right: we hate you, we're going to kill you in the name of Jesus. Most of the hatred over the years, most of the opposition over the years to human rights, whether it's around gay and lesbian issues or not; you go to South Africa and the opposition to apartheid was led by the Christian church. You go to the southern U.S. and the opposition to freedom from slavery was led by the church. The southern Baptist convention is the largest Protestant denomination in the United States of America and it was founded on slavery. They wanted to keep their slaves when the northern Baptists said they should oppose slavery. And so they broke away and formed their own denomination and today it's the largest in the United States of America. The Christian church has a terrible, terrible record and will be held accountable by God to their opposition to human rights and equality in our world. Because of the death threats the police came to me the week before and said to me, "Brent, you've got to take precautions," and I have to be careful what I say because some of it is confidential, but they said, "There's a group that's coming to get you at the weddings, to kill you, and we need to give you protection," and they insisted that I wear my bullet proof vest that you bought for me years before. Most churches buy vestments for their clergy; this church buys bullet proof vests for its clergy! They insisted I wear the bullet proof vest and the night before I called my sister and my family and it was the second time I'd called my family to say I love you, and if anything happens tomorrow, please know that I love you. So the next morning they'd arranged to pick John and I up at our home. Normally we'd get up in the morning and get in the car and drive the usual route to church, but they said, no, no. We're picking you up. There arrived two bodyguards – two of the toughest lesbians I've ever seen in my life! Yes, I said, I'll do whatever you tell me. You tell me what to do and I'll do what you tell me. They picked John and I up early in the morning and drove us a round-about route to get to the church and we got to the side and they rushed me into the building quickly and told me I couldn't leave the building for the rest of the day until the service was over. There were twelve bodyguards hovering around me the whole morning, but we didn't expect much to happen in church. This was a Sunday. We had church at nine and eleven in the morning and the weddings weren't until the afternoon. At the eleven o'clock service when we were letting our guard down and just enjoying God's presence, just enjoying the spirit of worship together, a woman came down the front of the church at anointing time, and I was anointing here, and she came down yelling and screaming and throwing pamphlets and yelling anti-gay comments and I did exactly the opposite of what they'd told me to do: They'd said, "Brent, if anything happens, just stay away and let us handle it." Instead, I got up, because I didn't like her yelling in our church and I got up and walked around to her and I just very – non-threatening – way said, "You know, what you're doing is illegal because in the province of Ontario it's against the law to disrupt a worship service. It's a criminal offence." So I said, "This is against the law and you can be charged for this," and she pushed me and she was eventually charged with assault and found guilty for assault. So that



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really scared us because we hadn't expected that to happen in church in the morning. So later that afternoon a thousand people came. How many of you were here for the weddings? (quite a number raised their hands). A thousand people came, lined up outside, excited, and all had to be searched by the police. There were fifty police officers in the basement of the church. The night before they'd been prepared to surround the church with the Riot Squad because of the threats. There were protestors outside and this whole section here – there were eighty media representatives from around the world: from Germany, from Japan, from the United States and from Canada and it was the first time in many countries in the world that there was any positive coverage about GLBT people, and it was the picture of me and the gay and lesbian couples in church getting married. Many young people in the world found out that they weren't the only ones and that there were Christians who were gay and lesbian. So we performed the ceremony that day and afterwards I sat up there and I signed the documents; I issued the marriage license to them and celebrated and it was wonderful – and the very next day the government refused to recognize them! So we took them to court and we joined our cases with the other cases and we won the court case and we won the appeal case; and then the Federal government decided not to appeal to the Supreme Court of Canada. And today we have equal marriage. The media told us that because of the extensive amount of coverage during that six week period that it was the largest shift in public opinion on any social issue in the history of Canada, that shift, because everybody was talking about it and when prejudice comes out and is vocalized that is the best chance of dissolving it. When it's held inside it's dangerous, but when people start to vocalize it and discuss it and hear another opinion, for many people that prejudice will dissolve and go away. Once you were not a people; now you are the people of God.

Passover reminds us that we can stay in slavery; we can stay in the comfortable places, or we can follow the call of God out of slavery into freedom. The scripture says that Jesus came to set us free. It is for freedom that Christ came, the scripture says.

Yesterday John was in London Ontario. John is my partner. His parents are 92 and it is his Mum's birthday today; she is 93. John's dad lives in his home by himself; he cooks his own meals and drives every day or second day to visit his wife who is in a seniors' home. He goes and gets his own groceries and this week he failed his driver's test, so he will no longer be able to drive and that will radically change his life. So it was good that we had planned that John would go this weekend to visit with his dad and be with him and to talk with him and to celebrate his mum's birthday. John was away and yesterday afternoon I went shopping with a friend to get some groceries. I was on the Gardiner, driving along and was involved in a car accident. The car is badly, badly damaged. I'm okay although I'm a little sore in some spots, but I'm fine and everyone else is fine, but it was a real scary moment. At first I told my friend – after hours of dealing with the police and the towing company – and I was so nervous about it all and after I'd had the accident I did what I was not supposed to do – I jumped out of the car and ran down the Gardiner to where the other cars were because there was a pile-up – and I wanted to make sure everyone else was okay; and they were – and I wasn't going to call John because I didn't want him to worry. But after a little while I wanted to call him; I had to tell him. I had to talk to my partner, the person whom I love and so I called him and told him and we chatted for awhile and then that evening he called me back. He said, "Brent, I've been thinking. I just wanted to make sure that you know that I love you, because," he said, "in an instant everything could have changed – in an instant." And his call to me probably shook me more than the accident in a sense because it reminded me that so much can change in an instant. The journey from slavery



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to freedom is important. The history of our church is important, but it's very very important that tonight you call someone and tell them that you love them. It's very very important that you not leave unsaid those words! Or you may have had a fight or difference of opinion with someone, maybe a family member you haven't spoken to in years, so I would ask you this evening – forget the reason, just call. They may accept it, they may not. Just call and reach out and say, I love you. Just imagine what life would be like without Metropolitan Community Church of Toronto. Just imagine what life must be like for many people for all kinds of reasons around the city and around the world who don't have a church home like this. Just imagine what it must be like to be stuck in the place of slavery believing the misinterpretations of scripture and the biases that seep into organized religion. When Jesus spoke to the disciples they were all busy; they were working; they were caring for their families. Jesus said, *Come and follow me*. Jesus said, *Step out of the familiar place. Move into a new place, a place of deepening your relationship with God, a place of making a difference in the world, of making the world a better place*. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation: God's own people that you may declare the wonderful deeds of God who's called you out of the shadows into God's marvelous light. Once you were not a people but now you are God's people. Once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy. Jesus says to you, *Come and follow and I will make you fishers of souls*.

Amen.