

Friday, April 19, 2019

Good Friday

Isaiah 52.13—53.12; John 18.1—19.42

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Tonight we continue with our exploration of the New Passover—of how our Christian commemoration of Holy Week, through Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Great Vigil of Easter—mirror and reframe the original Jewish Passover in a Christian context. Last night, at our Maundy Thursday service, we began our commemoration, our exploration, by comparing how what happened on that first Passover is, in many ways, mirrored in Holy Week. How the Israelites were given instructions to sacrifice lambs as a meal to nourish and sustain them as they began their Exodus out of Egypt. As they began their new life of freedom from the Egyptians through their journey to the Promised Land. How the blood of those lambs was to be placed on the doorposts and lintels as a sign to God to “pass over” the homes of his people, to spare them from death and destruction. We primarily focused on how in our Christian tradition we often talk about Jesus as being the Lamb of God. And how in his institution of the Last Supper, bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ, nourishing and sustaining us in our own journey of faith. Our own journey to new life in Christ. And how through him, we obtain freedom from sin and death.

Two Passovers, as it were. Two meals. Two covenants. Two journeys to new life. Both centered around the body and blood of lambs.

Tonight, in our commemoration of Good Friday, we return to the image of the lamb—to the image of the Lamb of God—and to the significance of the sacrifice of Jesus in bringing about this new Passover. To this part of our new Passover that is Good Friday.

This imagery of Jesus as the lamb has (at least part of) its origin in our Old Testament reading from the Prophet Isaiah, where we heard a portion of the Song of the Suffering Servant:

He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account. Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. (Is 53.3-5)

In this poem, Isaiah emphasizes the suffering of the servant for the sake of the people. Of one who “like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth” (Is 53.7b). In this imagery, the early church saw the servant giving himself up to death and being numbered as the transgressors as a foreshadowing, as an image, for Jesus. As a means of understanding the death of Jesus on the cross, who himself was led to the slaughter, as we heard in our Passion Narrative from the Gospel according to John. Led to the slaughter for our transgressions, for our iniquities. To spare us from punishment for our sins. To provide us with the ultimate healing.

Returning to the image of the original Passover, with the blood of the lamb being put on the doorposts and lintels as a sign of salvation for the people of Israel, in the death of Christ on the cross, we see there his blood as a sign of salvation for all humanity. That just as God passed over the Israelites to save them from death, in the blood of the Lamb of God—of Jesus—we see blood on the cross as a sign that we are saved from sin and death. And we see fulfillment of the prophecy from Isaiah that the Suffering Servant, though blameless and without sin, took on the sins of the many to spare them from the wages of sin. That through his death on the cross, Jesus took on the sins of humanity, sparing us all from the wages of sin and death. That sin and death have passed over us.

But this is where the Passion Narrative we heard tonight differs from the Song of the Suffering Servant. For while the Song of the Suffering Servant provides the prophecy, John's Passion Narrative proclaims the fulfillment of the prophecy. But not as Isaiah would have envisioned. John's Passion Narrative does not describe Jesus as suffering. Rather, John, in his telling of the Passion Narrative, portrays a very different image of Jesus. As one who rather than suffers on the cross, is one who is a triumphant king who reigns from the cross. In fact, throughout the narrative, Jesus is portrayed as one very much in control of his fate. Unlike other versions of the Passion that we hear on Palm Sunday. Rather than being arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus hands himself over to the soldiers. During his trial, Jesus ends up asking the questions and the chief priests and Pilate are obliged to respond. In his questioning, he even manages to get Pilate to confirm that Jesus is a king. On his way to his crucifixion, Jesus carries his own cross to Golgotha. On the cross, no one takes Jesus' life from him, but rather he gives up his spirit of his own accord. Throughout, Jesus demonstrates control and grace befitting Messiah and King. He is no mere lamb, but the perfect Paschal Lamb. Even in his death—particularly in his death—Jesus demonstrates that he is the master of the situation. That he is not succumbing to what is done to him, but is reigning as Lord. Even proclaiming, "It is finished." A bold statement that his work is completed. That his reign abolishes sin and death. That his reign even transcends sin and death.

This image of Christ reigning from the cross is important to our understanding of what happened on that first Good Friday. Important to our understanding of why this day is so critical to who we are as Christians. John's version of the Passion makes it clear that Christians are not to despair at the memorial of Jesus' death. In fact, in ancient times, this day was called the Triumph of the Cross. For Christ dying on the cross demonstrates the mystery of God's self-giving love. That God loves his children so much that he was willing to let his only Son take our sins upon him, and to die so that those sins might themselves be destroyed. And in his own death, death itself is even destroyed. Indeed, a triumph made on the cross. This triumph is a reminder that we gather not to mourn this day, but to celebrate Christ's life-giving passion and to find strength and hope in his reigning from the cross. In the gift that he provides through his reign from the cross.

Tonight we stand at the foot of the cross. Looking up at our Lord, who willingly died for the world's salvation. For your salvation. For mine. That is what God's love looks like. That sin and death are destroyed is a triumph of that love—a triumph freely and lovingly given by the One who reigns from the cross.