



SERMONS THAT WORK

Good Friday

Christ Our Passover

[RCL]: Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 22; Hebrews 10:16-25 or Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9; John 18:1-19:42

From noon on Good Friday through Easter Sunday morning is the Christian Passover. In these three days, Jesus passed over from death into life and opened the way for us to follow. The two stories of the Passover and Jesus' death are quite intertwined. This is why we refer to Jesus as our Passover who is sacrificed for us. To look back to the beginning of John's Gospel, the evangelist wrote in the first chapter that John the Baptist referred to Jesus as "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

In his death, Jesus makes this imagery real. Jesus becomes the Passover Lamb. The Gospel of John is very precise in its use of time. John wants his readers to understand that Jesus is sentenced to die at 12 noon on the eve of Passover. The disciple John saw this as no accident of history, but as a significant theological fact.

Jesus died along with the Passover lambs, making complete his identification as our Passover sacrificed for us. There is one small problem. Passover lambs were not sacrifices. I know this would be a small distinction for the lamb itself as, either way, it dies. But in the story of the first Passover, the lambs were not put to death to atone for sins, to make us one with God again. It is helpful to remember the Passover.

The first Passover occurred on the night before the Israelites were set free from bondage to the Egyptians. The Israelites gathered in homes to eat the meal as prescribed by God. The blood of the Passover lamb was painted on the doorposts so that the Angel of Death would pass over the Jewish homes as it traveled through Egypt, killing all the firstborn in the land. Passover became the central act of remembrance of the Jewish Community. Through the Passover meal, the story of the Exodus from Egypt is retold. Each generation is called to make the story of the Exodus their own story.

Then, on the night before he died, Jesus said that he was making a New Covenant. But the new covenant Jesus proclaimed was not a new idea as the prophet Jeremiah had anticipated the new covenant centuries earlier in writing,

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah... I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. (Jeremiah 31:31-33)

In his death and resurrection, Jesus sealed that new covenant with his own blood. As the blood of the Passover lamb marked the Israelites as God's own people and protected them from the Angel of Death, Jesus' blood overcomes death and seals the new covenant that marks us as children of God. We too can pass over from death to life as we by faith make Jesus' death our own in baptism.

Jesus expands on the role of the Passover lamb. Once a meal to connect the people of God to their covenant with God, Jesus also made the Passover lamb into the sacrifice to end all sacrifices. Jesus' death would accomplish once and for all what the blood of thousands of lambs could never do. Jesus was the perfect Passover lamb who ended the need for sacrifices and changed the meaning of the Passover itself.

Our reading from the Prophet Isaiah is an important example of the prophecies that were in Israel's sacred writings long before Jesus' birth. Yet, by the time he was born, no one was reading this passage from Isaiah as messianic. How *could* it be the Messiah? Isaiah prophesied of a person who would be unjustly killed and that in his death, this martyr would carry our infirmities and diseases, our transgressions and iniquities. A Jewish martyr, yes. The Messiah, no.

From Abel's death at the hands of his jealous brother Cain to the wholesale slaughter of faithful Jews in Israel by King Antiochus Epiphanes about 160 years before Jesus' birth, there had been many good people martyred for scant cause. The perversion of justice prophesied by Isaiah seemed all too real.

When God became human in Jesus, the Holy Trinity would not give up on divine love for us, no matter what the cost. If being God in first-century Palestine meant that Rome would unjustly put Jesus to death on a cross, then the Messiah would pay that price. It was so beyond what anyone expected to happen to the Anointed One that Isaiah wrote hundreds of years earlier, "Who could have imagined his future?"

After his resurrection, Jesus explained the prophets of old to his disciples. This is shown in stories like Jesus encountering two followers fleeing Jerusalem on Easter Sunday, only to meet Jesus on the road to Emmaus. He explained the scripture to them to reinterpret Isaiah's Suffering Servant passages and other texts in the light of Easter.

Why did Jesus have to die? Jesus said he was going to give his life as a ransom for many. Of course, the idea that the sacrifice of a life could be for the forgiveness of sins was not a new one with Jesus. Judaism had centuries of practice in sacrificial culture. Goats, bulls, lambs, and even doves were among the many animals offered as a sin offering. The life of the animal was given as a sacrifice to atone for the sins of the people.

Judaism put an end to the Canaanite ideas of human sacrifice that preceded them, but they did not abolish animal sacrifices. Moses' law prescribed when and how animal sacrifices were to be offered, and it was in this culture of sacrifice that Jesus ministered. There had always been voices within that culture that spoke against sacrifices. In Psalm 50, the Psalmist wrote, "If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the whole world is mine and all that is in it. Do you think I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats?"

The answer in a sacrificial culture, is, Yes, God we did think you wanted that blood, those lives. And while the Psalmist writes that the content of the heart is what matters, he does not write directly against sacrifice. And so it was within this culture that lifted up animal sacrifices as how one could get right with God after committing sin that Jesus came to do away with the whole sacrificial system. God ended the system in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Jesus' death revealed to humanity both the depth of our estrangement from God and the path back to reconciliation—which is faith in God as revealed in Jesus, the Christ. Jesus was the one whom Isaiah had called the righteous one, who will make many righteous and bear their sins.

There is yet another connection to the Passover lamb. The Passover lamb was first and foremost a meal. The way one sealed a connection with the covenant was to eat the meal. Jesus changed the significance of the Passover meal making his body the bread and his blood the wine.

In this strange Holy Week, we wait and watch the spread of COVID-19 with real concern for the most vulnerable among us. Yet while this virus came upon us without our being able to properly plan, we are not unprepared. Even on Good Friday, we are an Easter people, as even at the grave, we can sing God's praises. But we have only ever been an Easter people in a Good Friday world. It is at the foot of the cross where we passover from death to life.

While many of us are cut off from our accustomed places of worship and others in our community, we are not estranged from God and so remain in communion with all those with whom the Holy Trinity is in communion. That deeper connectedness is why Jesus would not abandon his love for us, even when the cost was faithfulness unto death. And especially in this Holy Week unlike any other, we can experience the very real presence of Jesus in our hearts as we worship, wherever and however that happens. For these Great Three Days from Maundy Thursday to Easter are the Passover of the Lord. And it is on this day that Jesus invites you to once more join him in your heart of hearts in passing over from death to life through faith in him.

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