

“The Blood of the Lamb”

Reading: Matthew 26:17-30; Revelation 5:1-10

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It's good for us that God is willing to speak in our language. That's part of what's so amazing about the incarnation of Christ, this “enfleshment” in which God was willing to set aside His glory and take on our humble nature so that we could know Him; God comes to us where we are rather than demanding that we first ascend to His level. And so as we have been wrestling with this problem of the atonement this Lent, we've done so realizing that God is willing to translate His actions into our language. We've been trying to make sense of what Jesus did on the cross for us, and how His death makes a difference for us today, and we've done that by translating the cross into language that makes more sense to us. We've used the translation of the concept of sacrifice, or the concept of the courtroom and how the cross satisfies God's sense of justice, or the concept of new creation in Christ, or the concept of Christ's paradoxical victory over evil.

These are all the church's attempt to translate the Christ event into language we can better understand. It's really an intersection between God's story and our stories, and so some translations, some explanations of what Christ has done, make better sense to some people than others. Some of them even make better sense in certain cultures than others, and so there are Eastern models of the atonement that make sense from certain Eastern worldviews, or medieval European models of the atonement, or American models of the atonement. We have our different stories that shape how we look at the world and shape our language, and yet God is willing to speak to us in ways that we can understand.

As we've been exploring these models of the atonement, we've been relying on the various classic models used by the church throughout history, all of which have their roots in the various images used by the biblical writers. But as I was thinking about this series of sermons, one question that came to mind for me was what Jesus had to say Himself about what He was going to do. These other explanations of the cross, while they're accurate, really mostly come from Paul and even later Christian writers. What did Jesus say about what He was doing on the cross? What imagery did He have in mind as He talked about the cross?

And so we're having sort of a surprise communion service today, because the more I thought about it, the more I kept coming back to that story of the Last Supper, and it seemed to me that the only way we could properly explain this particular model of the atonement was to enact it through the celebration of communion. Jesus had a variety of things to say about His death, but this Last Supper is really the single most developed description by Jesus of what He's about to do. It was a surprise to me to think about this, because I haven't read anyone really seriously talking about this as a model of the atonement, but that's what Jesus is really doing here: He's translating the cross into language that His followers can understand. And He does that by casting Himself as the Passover lamb.

It's a startling moment, or it would be if we were more familiar with the Passover. The Jewish celebration of the Passover meal is a highly ritualized and scripted event. There are certain things that you do in a certain order and a certain way because that's how the story goes, and it's always been done that way even since before Jesus' time. The whole point is to remember the story of the first

Passover, and so you re-enact the story while re-telling it, and in so doing you bring that ancient story into your own time and place and make it *your* story.

We all have our stories, right? We all have those ways of perceiving ourselves and telling our histories that may or may not be rooted in reality, but they're how we think of ourselves nonetheless. Maybe your story about yourself is that you're a family man or a family woman, and you deeply invest in your family. Or maybe you perceive yourself as someone who's really good at fixing things and building things, or maybe your story about yourself is that something happened to you in the past and you'll never be able to move on, and that's how you define yourself, or maybe you see yourself as someone who is always looking on the bright side. There are as many stories as there are people. There are even collective stories that describe how entire nations of people perceive themselves; that's what this Passover celebration is. It's one of the most important stories defining the Jewish identity as a people; it's *their* story.

Their story is the story of the Exodus, that they were slaves in Egypt and they cried out to their God, and He came to their rescue by sending Moses to challenge Pharaoh and his gods. What followed was a showdown of ten plagues demonstrating God's power and Pharaoh's impotence with the intent being to convince Pharaoh to let God's people go. The final and worst plague was the plague on the firstborn, in which the angel of death moved throughout the land on a certain night and killed all the firstborns, whether they were humans or animals. But in order to show God's power, God's people were spared, and the sign of their deliverance was the blood of a spotless lamb smeared over their doorposts. They were to eat the meat of that lamb along with certain other foods that night, and they were to be ready to depart. And that's exactly what happened; Pharaoh set them free after this terrible plague.

And so they were commanded to re-enact this story every year at the same time, to share the meal with one another and ask questions and tell the story that made them who they were. And they all know how the meal is supposed to go; they've all done it dozens of times. Except this time, as Jesus and His disciples settle into the Passover routine, Jesus deviates from the script. He takes some of the central elements of the meal, the bread and one of the cups of wine, which already have Passover meanings, and He shockingly inserts Himself into those symbols. He is removing the Passover lamb and putting Himself in its place; it is not the blood and body of the lamb that give them safe passage out of Egypt, it is the blood and body of Jesus Christ. He takes their familiar old story of salvation and invades it with this new story of salvation.

And this identification of Jesus as the Passover lamb becomes one of the central ways He is understood. When John gives his account of the life of Jesus, he makes sure to emphasize John the Baptist's exclamation when he first sees Jesus: "Look, the lamb of God!" It's a significant and meaningful contrast with the description of Jesus as the good shepherd of the sheep; He is Himself the Passover lamb. It is specified that the Passover lamb's bones are not to be broken, and likewise, the gospel writers emphasize that Jesus' legs were not broken on the cross as was usual. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul refers to Jesus as our Passover lamb who has been sacrificed.

But the image comes most clearly into the foreground in the book of Revelation, which tells the grand cosmic story of God's final salvation of His people. The glorious image of God seated on His throne in the midst of the heavenly worship gives way to the Lamb Who Was Slain, the one who is

worthy to open the seals on the scroll that reveals and enacts the final fulfillment of God's promises. It is Jesus revealed as the Passover Lamb that brings history to its completion and all things are made right. This Passover Lamb is the key to God's work in history.

And, meaningfully, that Lamb is first identified as the Lion of Judah, an image of power and strength and conquest. The Passover itself is a battle taking place between God and Pharaoh, and the Lord is depicted as a conquering warrior. After the battle of the Passover, the song of Moses says of God, "The horse and its rider He has hurled into the sea!" God invaded Egypt and fought for His people, conquering His enemies like a great heavenly warrior. And yet on the cross, the Lion is revealed as the Lamb, and the mighty deliverer of Passover is shown to be the slaughtered sacrifice.

Jesus is taking many of these images we've been working with for the past several weeks and weaving them into this story. The lamb is a sacrifice, but it's not a sacrifice for sin like we usually talk about with the cross, it's a sacrifice for deliverance. We talked last week about Christ's victory over evil on the cross, and here at Passover we see a similar sort of victory over God's enemies. But again, Jesus is invading this ancient story, injecting Himself into it, drawing that story to a meaningful conclusion in Himself and His action on the cross. As they gather to tell that story again, and they reach the climactic moments of God saving them, Jesus reveals that God is both the initiator of the action and the means to its conclusion. He invades Egypt to save His people, but He is also the sacrificial victim that gives its life for their deliverance. He is both the warrior and the one who is slain.

He invades their story, the story that defines who they are, and in unexpected ways, He pulls together the threads of that story and brings it to a meaningful conclusion in Himself, and suddenly they see that the story was about Him all along and it never could have ended satisfactorily without Him. He changes the entire plot of the story, and in His invasion He becomes the motivator behind their need for salvation — they never would have even known how badly they needed to be saved if He had just left them alone — but He also takes on the role of being the means to their salvation, and they see that they never could have been delivered without Him. And their story is never the same again.

Today we gather around the table again, and we tell the story, and we bring our own stories to the table and let the crucified Christ invade those stories as this bread and juice enter our bodies. We partake of this ancient story of God delivering His people through this sacrificial lamb, and our stories are brought into alignment with that ancient story, so that it continues in our daily lives here and now. And we realize that our stories never would have made sense without Him, and they will never be the same.



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