

Sermon – First Passover
 First Church of Christ Woodbridge
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God, I ask that the words spoken today be yours and not mine. I ask that Wisdom be present and that your Spirit abound. Thank you for this day and for this moment, and all those hereafter. Amen.

So today, being the first Sunday of the month, is our ritual Communion Sunday. In celebrating communion, the breaking of bread and drinking of wine, we typically think of the Last Supper, celebrating Jesus' final meal with his disciples. Now, as many of you may already know the Last Supper was, according to the related passages in the New Testament, really a Passover meal. Luke tells us that "Jesus sent Peter and John, saying 'Go and prepare the Passover meal for us that we may eat it.'" (Luke 22:8) So to better understand our practice of communion, rather than simply look at the Last Supper meal, I think it's helpful to go back and look at Passover, and the original ritual.

Luckily for us, our reading for the day, assigned as it were, by the lectionary, was that of the very first Passover. It is the story of when Passover was first established, commanded by God for the Israelites to keep and to practice.

The thing about this story is, it's not particularly a nice one. At least, not if you happen to be Egyptian... We read in the story that the Israelites are commanded to have a very specific sacrifice ritual, during which they shall smear blood on the "two door posts and the lintel (basically the top of the doorway) of the house," so that the Lord will pass over them on God's way to strike down the first borns both human *and* animal in the land of Egypt. Now, you may be thinking, do we really have to focus on that bit? Why not the parts where they roast the lamb with spices or what it means to sacrifice things, do we really need to focus on the part where it explicitly states God is going to go kill a bunch of babies and children simply for being Egyptian?

Well, yeah, I mean it's a super uncomfortable story, at least for me and I would dare to guess for others as well, which is precisely why I think we should wrestle with it. There's an explicit judgement happening based on race and it's being taken out on who we might consider to be the most innocent of all; the young.

What do we make of this? I confess, I may not go to church as often as others, but I don't think I've ever heard anyone address specifically, this portion of the story. Sure I've heard the story read many times, I think it's one most of us are quite familiar with, but I've never heard anyone actually dig in to the implications or challenges of the narrative that says God kills, kills young, kills based on where they grew up, based on an ethnicity they didn't choose. So naturally, I was like, challenge accepted, this is a super uncomfortable topic about which I have no answers off the top of my head, what could possibly go wrong in tackling it for a sermon?

I guess we'll see. I sat with this for a while. I'm a hospital chaplain. I watch people die almost every day. Now, in this era, many are dying from a plague, just like in our story. Except this plague we call COVID-19. Of course, amidst the plague there are many other afflictions, I work on an oncology unit as well as in a trauma ICU and in the Emergency Department, so I see a pretty broad range of death. Some young, some old, and everything in between.

I can't, seeing that, seeing the reality of death so closely so frequently, so un-abstractly, I can't at this point in my life make sense of this story. In many ways there's no room for it within my theology of a loving God. And yet at the same time, to dismiss such an important, formative and critical story of our scripture because I don't like it or I don't understand it or it makes me uncomfortable, is to dishonor the tradition. To say it's not a true story, or that that part, the part where God takes responsibility for so much death, to say that's not real, that that bit is the fictional mythical bit, is to prioritize my own spiritual comfort over the length, depth, and breadth of a tradition steeped in the mystery that only so many thousands of years can accrue. Just because we don't like a thing, just because we don't want to believe a thing does not necessarily make it untrue.

So I can't dismiss it outright. I think you can dishonor people, even after they have long passed and I don't want to do that, to Egyptians or Israelites. I don't want to be dishonest or inauthentic either and I don't want to perpetuate the kind of ideology that says, "oh well there's the God of the Old Testament and then there's the God of the New Testament," so you know, the Old Testament doesn't really matter as much because now we have the new covenant... etc... that line of thinking which, is not new to tradition, is what we call supersessionism, a replacement theology, where we the church with our new covenant have replaced the old God and the old covenant, and the we've replaced the Israelites. To make a long story short, this line of thinking is the pervasive underbelly of anti-Semitism, of Nazism.

So, I don't think we can dismiss this original Passover story, nor look away from the discomfort. And as much as I want to or as much as I want to justify it instead, or intellectualize it somehow, I can't. I can't make sense of this story and not be manipulating the text for my own comfort and needs. To try and find reason in it to try and find some justification for the willful slaughter of young Egyptians feels to dishonor not only those who died in the story but the story itself. Again, it prioritizes spiritual comfort over a history that was included in our scripture for a reason, even if I, even if we, don't yet understand what that reason is.

So if we can't make sense of it and we can't ignore it or manipulate it somehow to make sense, at least not ethically so from my perspective... what do we do?

First, I think we sit with the emotion that the process evokes. I think we sit in the pit of uncertainty and discomfort rather than run from it and rather than trying to intellectualize it. And I think this can apply to our time now, our plagues of the current day, the suffering we can't understand when we believe in such a good God. The feeling that the incoherency mixed with pain evokes, I think it's important that first we recognize that pain, those feelings, and then we welcome them. Thoughts are but the shadows of our emotions, so whatever we feel about this story in many ways gives us many more answers than any thoughts we may have about it. The

way it makes us feel inside, confusion, perhaps disgust, defensiveness, sadness, all of that says something.

Perhaps it is the way our bodies try to teach us what we come to know as right and wrong, compassionate versus judgmental. Perhaps it is our guts telling us that to harm others, to discriminate based on race, that there is something profoundly sinful in that. I think our emotions give us an honest, authentic and genuine reflection of who we are and of who we on some level want to be the world; the impact we want to have the change we want to see.

I think there's somewhat of a misunderstanding that Christianity is the place to come to feel safe. We have the loving God, the forgiving one, the one of mercy and grace who loves all. And yes, that's true, at least I believe it to be true, but this is also an awesome God, one whom we are commanded to respect, a God whom we will never understand, who's essence our finite minds can never truly grasp. Faith in God is not promised to be easy. It is not without sacrifice, without shadows in the valley of death, it is not without moments of despair. Faith does not mean we will live our lives without pain, free of conflict or anxiety, without troubling questions. Faith does not mean we have the answers. What faith means is we have chosen the hard, challenging, yet patient path that despite or perhaps *in spite* of all those things, we will still choose love. Faith is the commitment we make to keeping our hearts soft in a hard world, our minds open to what feels like a shrinking place of curiosity, a commitment that says when we don't understand rather than dismiss things because they don't align in our minds, that just because they don't match up with whom we think God *should* be, that we recognize that though questions are beautiful and important, it is not for us to tell God who God is or ought to be. If we determine who God is based on our own judgements our own ideas cherry-picked from the passages of the Bible with which we do agree, the ones we do think we understand, then God becomes nothing other than a bigger version of ourselves or at best a bigger version of who we want to be. Faith says in this tradition, that I will take this tradition with its stories as they are, for what they are, comfortable or not, and be open to the mystery that is God. The mystery of our own history.

As I'm sure you know there are many troubling stories in the Bible, not just the one today. Stories of rape, murder, child sacrifice. The story of the betrayal of Jesus, of his flogging and ultimately his crucifixion at the hands of the state. There are also stories of love, mercy, compassion, sacrifice, and forgiveness. The story of the Last Supper though perhaps as incoherent and confusing to the disciples at that time as the original Passover story is to us now, though a story foretelling betrayal and death is also one of the greatest love stories ever told. My body broken for you. My blood shed, for you.

Perhaps the stories, the myths and ancient tales, perhaps they aren't all meant to be edifying, to tell us how to be or how to live. Perhaps they are merely a reflection of what already is, who we already are. To mirror back at us, that this is the world in which we live. It is both ugly and beautiful. There is death and there is life. There is sickness and there is healing. Which, is not to suggest a false duality of the world. I don't want to suggest that it's black and white, good or bad, either or, simply that there is a broad spectrum of experience of events, and that somewhere along that spectrum things fall between good and bad depending on how we interpret and make meaning of them. What feels good to us, what hurts us, what makes sense and what doesn't and all of it together makes the complex tapestry that we come to know as our history. All of it

comes together to reveal a world far more complex than we could ever imagine, created by a God far more mysterious than we could ever comprehend.

So, I guess I just want to say, first, that I think it's okay to not have answers. To have portions of our lives, of our tradition that don't make sense to us and that at times make us profoundly uncomfortable. Though I myself love a good intellectual exercise, life is lived much more so in and through our emotions. In our joys, in our sorrows, in our feelings safety, and our moments of discomfort and uncertainty and question. Secondly, what I think this original Passover story *can* offer us today (other than discomfort), is with a reflection, that honestly, doesn't look too different from today. We still have plagues, we still discriminate based on ethnicity, so what is different if anything? I think the difference is, we now have a modified road map, one given to us through the story of the Last Supper, through communion set forth by Jesus. We have another option, one with the kind of faith and love talked about in our passage from Romans. We have an additional story, that doesn't replace the one before but broadens our spectrum and tell us that even confronted in the darkest of times, even the most uncertain of times, we always have the power to choose love. Unconditional love for this world, for this place that we call home. I hope you know how loved you are. I hope you know that your moments of doubt and uncertainty are as cherished, loved, and just meaningful as any other part of your faith journey. Uncertainty is a part of life and a part of faith. I pray that even amidst the discomfort that we may also rejoice in our uncertainties, for they mean that we are a people who walk by faith, genuinely, questioningly, and regardless of our questions, with a deep love and commitment for the world, to God, and to the great mystery of this thing that we call life. Amen.