

MARCH 24TH, 2016: EUCHARIST OF THE LORD'S SUPPER
Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14 I Corinthians 11:23-26 John 13:1-15

Listening to today's first reading, have you ever wondered where these strange – almost bizarre - rituals for celebrating Passover originated? Couldn't the captive Jews in Egypt simply put some sort of a yard sign in front of their homes assuring Yahweh's Destroyer that they actually were members of Yahweh's Chosen People? What's with this lamb's blood on the doorpost, for instance?

The answer scholars usually give is a little complicated, but it does make sense.

If you want to remember something – especially an important event - you're always encouraged to hook it up with something you already know. This is obviously what happened when the church wanted us to remember the birth of Jesus. The leaders simply hooked it up with an event everyone in the third and fourth century CE Roman Empire was already familiar: the pagan feast of Saturnalia.

The Saturnalia commemorated the “turnabout” of the sun which happened at the end of December, at the point the sun begins to shine longer each day. Since the sun was necessary for the earth's fertility, lights, fires, evergreen trees and branches were employed to convey that concept. These symbols were utilized long before Jesus' birth.

The church didn't get rid of these symbols; when they put Christmas on December 25th, they simply gave them a new meaning. Jesus is now the light of the world; fire, evergreen trees and branches are symbols of this life Jesus brings us.

In a similar way, long before the Jewish Exodus from Egypt, every spring shepherds had to deal with the perils of moving their flocks from their winter pastures to their spring pastures. Not only were ewes lambing, there was always the fear that a demon “Destroyer” of young sheep was lurking around every corner. One way to keep the demon from devastating their flocks was for the shepherds to offer him an “apotropaic” sacrifice before they left: they'd slaughter one lamb and offer it to him so that he wouldn't help himself to lots of lambs. To show the Destroyer they'd actually done this, they'd sprinkle some of the lamb's blood on their door posts.

Need I go further? It seems 12th century BCE Jews simply reinterpreted a sign they'd been using for centuries; making it a symbol of Yahweh's delivering them from Egyptian slavery.

In some sense, early Christians did something similar. They saw something deeper in their regular community meals than just taking care of their hunger. Remembering what Jesus did on the night before he died, they began to experience the risen Jesus in everyone with whom they shared those meals. And when they took from the “cup of the covenant,” they also committed themselves to carrying on Jesus' ministry. They also became other Christs, something which only happens when we give ourselves.

But perhaps most important, they began to appreciate a deeper meaning in their service of others. The simple act of washing another person's feet became an outward sign of their total giving. Many scholars today believe such foot washing is actually an eighth sacrament. It's certainly an outward sign, instituted by Christ, which gives grace. But it's rarely practiced. The reason is simple. As a friend once observed, “It's impossible to wash someone's feet while you're standing on a pedestal.”

Tonight of all nights we've got to get down from our pedestals. We're not just experiencing a set of liturgical rituals. They've become an outward sign that we're continuing Jesus' ministry of giving himself. If we refuse to do that, we might as well offer a sacrifice to a Destroyer killing our sheep and sprinkle some blood on our doorposts.

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MARCH 27TH, 2016: EASTER VIGIL

Genesis 1:1-2:2 Genesis 22:1-18 Exodus 14:15-15:1 Luke 24:1-12

(Ideally we should proclaim all nine readings tonight. But space limits me to comment on only four.)

No matter how many readings we employ this evening from the Hebrew Scriptures, we must proclaim the reading from Exodus 14: the crossing of the sea. Whenever Jesus' earliest followers thought of his death and resurrection, their Jewish roots always brought them back to the book of Exodus and the miraculous crossing of the sea. Just as that event formed them into Yahweh's people, Jesus' death and resurrection formed his disciples into the new people of God. The parallels were obvious: both events took people of faith from the depths to the heights. There originally was no hope in either situation. The Israelites hit a dead end: the sea. Jesus' followers hit a dead end: his death.

Yet a surprise lurked in each situation; a path of dry land appeared in the sea, and a transformed life came from the tomb on Easter Sunday. But in each case, the participants were forced to experience a real or psychological death.

Years ago, one of my students, a farmer, made an interesting observation. "You know," he said, "that seed really has to be dead when I plant it. Green seed will just rot."

Abraham discovered that reality when he followed Yahweh's command to sacrifice Isaac. Though the passage's original readers would have interpreted it as an argument against child sacrifice, Abraham's dedication to carrying out Yahweh's will is its major theological point. Many of the pagan religions in Canaan not only tolerated such sacrifices, they demanded them. The community for whom the Genesis Elohist author wrote lived in that environment. When the pagans claimed they were more dedicated to their gods than their Israelite neighbors because they actually killed some of their children for them, the sacred author replied with this story.

Our Abraham-Isaac story reinforces the theology we find in tonight's first reading: Yahweh is a God who creates and sustains life. And that life is always "good." If anything's going to be killed to show dedication to Yahweh, it's an animal, not a person. The reason the biblical author doesn't have Yahweh stop Abraham from killing until the final second seems to be his conviction that Judaism's founder also had to reach the point of dying before he could reach the life Yahweh was offering. Whether we're in the Hebrew Scriptures or the Christian Scriptures, the message is the same: no life without death.

"Quantum" theologians tell us the same thing. These modern reflectors on God and God's word carry their reflections far beyond just this planet. Exploring the entire universe, they remind us that nothing comes to life until something dies. Our universe is in a constant process of dying and rising. It's the normal way God continues to create. If we're to play a role in that creative process, we also have to die. Abraham found that death in carrying out Yahweh's word just as the Hebrews discovered it when they took their first steps into the sea.

That's why, in tonight's gospel pericope, Luke employs one of his most important theological words: "must." The angels remind the women, ". . . The Son of Man *must* be handed over to sinners and be crucified, and rise on the third day." The evangelist's relationship with the risen Jesus had convinced him that dying with Jesus wasn't an option; it was an absolute necessity.

If we're not actually receiving the life Jesus attained perhaps it's because we're not actually dying; not giving ourselves completely to others. We no longer have to worry about sacrificing our children. Our God expects us to die by sacrificing ourselves.

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