

Maundy Thursday

Bulletin

Audio

"Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed."

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Today is the day of Unleavened Bread, the lamb must be prepared. According to the Law of Moses, the Passover lamb was to be without blemish. To keep an animal uninjured and spotless is not easy; the newborn lamb chosen to be the following year's sacrifice had to be kept indoors to keep it from hurting itself on rocks and thorns; it had to be watched over constantly, to ensure it did not injure itself somehow in the house. It would eat with the family at mealtimes, being as well nourished as any other member of the family.

The lamb spoken of by the prophet Nathan to David, the lone lamb owned by the poor man, the lamb which he *'treated as a daughter,'* which *'ate of his morsel and drank from his cup and lied in his arms'* was likely just such a Passover lamb.

The Prophet Isaiah speaks of the Messiah as this Passover lamb. It is written: *'As a lamb being led to the slaughter, he opened not his mouth.'* A lamb in danger is not silent, but bleats and wines and tries to run away, as a threatened animal would.

But the Passover lamb is silent, because it does not think that it has anything to fear from its owner. The lamb's owner cared for it, kept it from all harm, fed it well; he would even share a bed with it at night to keep it warm. So the lamb is silent; of course it is silent, because it trusts its owner to the end, even as the knife is put to its neck.

It is the custom of Greek Christians to slaughter a one year old lamb on the on this day, to be eaten on Easter. A few Greek friends of mine in my past life invited

me to participate, so I went to see this ancient tradition. They bound the lamb's legs, laid it on its side, and brought out the knife. It was quiet, no one, no thing made a sound. The expression in the lamb's eyes, in the few seconds before it was killed, struck me: a sort of fear, mixed with innocence.

It was almost an abomination to see such a sweet, trusting creature be betrayed by its keepers; and one might be compelled to ask why God would have established the sacrifice of a blameless young lamb as the central act of worship among his people. The reason, though, is simple: true worship consists in the giving and receiving of forgiveness; and forgiveness does not mean merely a shrugging off of past sins. Forgiveness is not merely saying: 'forget about it, it doesn't matter.' To forgive is to have the innocent suffer on the behalf of the guilty.

In the sacrifices of the Old Covenant, an innocent, unblemished animal would be killed to suffer for sins of Israel; and the guilty children of Israel would eat the flesh of the sacrificed animal, that they might partake of its innocence.

This is the central concept in the old sacrifices; the innocent took on the guilt of the guilty by dying, so that the guilty might take on the innocence of the innocent by eating. And this is necessary; it is painful business to forgive, for it is painful business to love, and there is no love, no true love, if there is not suffering for the sake of the beloved.

The Old Covenant and its animal sacrifices could bring reprieve to the people of Israel; but ultimately, it could not bring forgiveness of man's original sin; healing for his deep, inner corruption. Therefore, it is written: *'Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, [not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt...] For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.'*

A New Covenant with such great forgiveness must require such great suffering and such great sacrifice; and we sinful men could never render of ourselves the sacrifice demanded from the beginning, the complete obedience required of us, the offering of our entire selves to God. Therefore God spoke to Abraham at Horeb: *'The Lord will provide the sacrifice.'*

It is the week of Christ's Passion, and here we witness that indeed, *'The Lord is*

doing a new thing. No longer will unthinking animals suffer for sinful men; rather God will suffer in Jesus Christ, that we might receive the blessedness of God. Christ will take on the guilt of mankind, that mankind might partake of the innocence of Christ. *'For he who knew no sin became sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God.'*

For *'Our Lord Jesus Christ, on the night when he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples and said, 'Take and eat, this is my body.' 'Take and drink, this is the new covenant in my blood.'* Indeed, the New Covenant is only of the blood, the suffering, the agony of Our Lord Jesus; for it is poured out *for the forgiveness of sins*; for the washing away of our ancient strife against God.

Today we must eat our Lord's body and drink his blood; this is our desperate need; for we need forgiveness, and there is no forgiveness outside of the flesh of Christ; we must eat, and be united to his perfect innocence, for tomorrow, dear Christians, we will again witness how Our Lord Jesus is united to our terrible wickedness. We will see him receive the floggings and lashings which we deserved, the mockery and revilement for which our guilt begs, the blood-letting, tearing, striking, beating, shame that was ours as a birthright in Adam. We will see him die a criminal's death; for he has united himself to the crimes of all humanity.

He is our Passover lamb; but unlike those sacrificed for a thousand years before him, his eyes will not be filled with silence born of uncomprehending fear; his silence is born of resolve; for he loves us, and he will suffer for us, he will redeem us.

It is his deepest longing to die on the cross for our sin, that we might eat of his innocence in this Supper. Therefore, proclaiming our Lord's Passion until he comes again, come to this altar on the Eve of Christ's Crucifixion; in reverence be united to him who in perfect obedience gave himself to God, that in him, you too might pass through the consuming fire of the Father's glory and be made a partaker of the divine nature. For it is to accomplish this that your Savior does all he does, endures all he endures. Did you not hear his voice, how he calls to you this night, before what must happen to him tomorrow?

'I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.'

To him be all glory, honor and dominion, now and forever.

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: Exodus 12:1-14; 1 Corinthians 11:23-32; Luke 22:7-20.