

The Death of Death

Maundy Thursday, April 17, 2025

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Almighty Father, whose dear Son, on the night before he suffered, instituted the Sacrament of his Body and Blood: Mercifully grant that we may receive it thankfully in remembrance of Jesus Christ our Lord, who in these holy mysteries gives us a pledge of eternal life; and who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. AMEN.

Exodus 12:1-14 (NRSV)

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: ² This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. ³ Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. ⁴ If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. ⁵ Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. ⁶ You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. ⁷ They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. ⁸ They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. ⁹ Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. ¹⁰ You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. ¹¹ This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the LORD. ¹² For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. ¹³ The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. ¹⁴ This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

1 Corinthians 11:23-26 (NRSV)

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵

In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

John 13:1-17, 31b-35 (NRSV)

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ² The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper ³ Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, ⁴ got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. ⁵ Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. ⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" ⁷ Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." ⁸ Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." ⁹ Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" ¹⁰ Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." ¹¹ For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean." ¹² After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you?" ¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord--and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴ So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶ Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. ¹⁷ If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

³¹ Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³² If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³ Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' ³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

The title of my sermon is "The Death of Death". You may find that a surprising concept, but it's not even remotely original. I've taken it from John Owen, a puritan writer who in 1648 published a treatise entitled *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*. This full phrase is what I'd like us to focus our attention on this Maundy Thursday. When you look at the historical context of the first century Roman Empire, the

death of Christ was really unexceptional. Jesus was only one of countless people, Jewish and Gentile, whom the Romans crucified in those times. Crucifixions took place all the time.

What makes Jesus' death remarkable is how Jesus applies it to his disciples and us at his last supper with his disciples. They were eating the annual Passover meal. But this Passover was the final Passover for all time.

The First Passover is described in our Old Testament reading. Remember the setting. The people of Israel had grown from the seventy that Jacob and his sons brought with them when they followed Joseph into Egypt to over 600,000 persons. They were in cruel bondage to the Egyptian Pharaoh. God had heard their cries and sent Moses to deliver them, but Pharaoh would not let them go. God visited Egypt with plague after plague, but Pharaoh wouldn't budge. Finally God sends the tenth and final plague: He says, **"About midnight I will go out through Egypt. Every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the firstborn of the female slave who is behind the handmill, and all the firstborn of the livestock. Then there will be a loud cry throughout the whole land of Egypt, such as has never been or will ever be again."** (Exodus 11:4-6) But in verse 7 he says, **"But not a dog shall growl at any of the Israelites—not at people, not at animals—so that you may know that the LORD makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel."**

The firstborn of Egyptian and Israelite alike are under sentence of death. What is the distinction that saved the Israelites? It was the blood of the Passover lamb, as we hear in tonight's first reading. Verse 7: **"They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat [the Passover lamb.]** Verse 13: **"The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will *pass over* you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt."** The death of the firstborn stands for the death of all, just as the offering of the first fruits stands for the offering of the whole crop. God gives the Israelites protection from the death of the firstborn. He gives them the death of the Passover lamb instead. It saves the Israelites' firstborn from death. This was the first Passover, and God commanded that they reenact it every year to remember how he had saved them from death.

This is the meaning Jesus gives to his death at the Last Passover with his disciples. As Paul tells us in our second reading, he **"took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'** In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, **'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'**" (1 Corinthians 11:23-25) But Jesus' death goes beyond protecting us from physical death. Jesus' death protects us from eternal death, the

sentence all human beings are under outside of Christ. Romans 6:23 tells us, **“The wages of sin is death.”** But thanks be to God! He himself has become the Passover lamb and died in our place. Hebrews 2:9 tells us God has crowned Jesus **“with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.”** If someone does something *for* you, you don’t have to do it. If Barbara goes to the store *for me*, that means I don’t have to go. Because Jesus has tasted eternal death *for me*, that means I don’t have to. Jesus’ death is the Last Passover because it is eternally effective for everyone who puts his or her trust in him. The Death of Christ *is* The Death of Death.

Jesus died a real death on the actual wood of a physical cross. His physical dead body was laid in a real tomb. All this happened at a particular time, on a particular day in a specific year. That is why we focus on real, actual, concrete events during Holy Week. That’s why we eat real bread and drink real wine this night. Because Jesus’ death was real, it is really and actually effective in taking away real, actual sins and protecting those who trust in him from real, actual, eternal death. This is what Jesus means in our gospel after he washes the disciples’ feet, when he says, **“One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.”** Trusting in the death of Christ for the forgiveness of our sins and the death of our death means we are **“entirely clean.”** But we need daily to confess our sins, to have Jesus wash our feet, so to speak. Of course, by **“not all of you,”** he means Judas, whose heart was not with Jesus, though he had allowed him to wash his feet.

Romans 6:23 says, **“The wages of sin is death.”** But of course, that’s not the whole verse. It goes on to say, **“BUT the gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord.”** God himself, in Jesus, is the Passover lamb who has tasted death so we don’t have to. His death actually happened. It is really, actually, eternally effective. For those who put their trust in him, his death is the death of their death.

So what are we to do? Four things. **First**, lean on Christ. Just as even the Israelites had no power to avoid the death of the firstborn without the blood of the Passover lamb, we **“have no power of ourselves to help ourselves.”** (Collect for the Third Sunday in Lent, Prayer Book, p. 167) It’s only by God’s gracious gift that we are alive in Christ here tonight. Let each of us lean on Christ for our salvation. Let us thank him continually, and lean on him for our peace, for our joy, for the assurance of God’s pardon and love that each of us desperately needs.

Second, as you go through your day, look around you. Jesus said, **“The fields are white unto harvest.”** God the Holy Spirit is actively working in the lives of people in your neighborhood, your school, your book club, or your office. People around us are under the sentence of death. Let us pray for Christ to come to them in the power of his Holy Spirit, and in in our conversations and interactions with them.

Third, equip yourself to notice these people, to pray for them, to listen to them and ask them good questions that will open their hearts to God's work in their lives.

And fourth, take this sacrament of the Last Passover to your strength and assurance of God's love for you. **“For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.” (1 Corinthians 11:26)** Know that Jesus' death is the death of your death. The stripped altar is a stark contrast to its usual beauty and color. It's an actual physical event that reminds us that Jesus' death was also an actual physical event. He was taken from this earth just as these furnishings will be taken from the sanctuary this evening. His death was real. It is the death of your death and of mine. Thanks be to God. Amen.