

Lamb of God

Good Friday, 2005

Last night we gathered to learn about a special Jewish meal, the Seder. The Seder commemorates the story of Israel's creation when God took an enslaved group of people, convinced the Egyptian Pharaoh, through a series of plagues, that he really wanted to see the backside of these slaves and their troublesome God and led them through a watery grave to new life in the wilderness. On the Seder plate were symbolic foods – horseradish, to represent the bitterness of slavery, haroseth, a mixture of apple, nut and raisin, to represent the mortar mixed by slaves in the Egyptian building projects, salt water, to remind us of the tears that were wept, both by the slaves but also by the Egyptians who lost their firstborn sons, a roasted egg, green herbs – parsley – representing the green of new life, of spring, and unleavened bread, because when God declared it was the moment to leave, there was no time to allow bread to rise before it was baked. Also on the plate was a roasted shank of lamb. If you recall, the slaves were told to kill a lamb and use its blood to mark the doorposts of their homes. Then, when the final plague occurred, death would “pass over” those homes and spare their first born sons. A lamb was sacrificed in order that others would live.

Let's shift scenes a bit. You may have heard the expression: scapegoat. That's when a group chooses one person to blame for the ills of the community and sends that one away, into the wilderness. That one, in a sense, bears the sins of all. Anthropologists who study the behaviour of communities tell us that the larger group then feels that social order is somehow restored because they have, in a way, put the ills of the whole group on the back of this one person and then sent that one out of the group. The ills disappear, they believe, and the community feels better. For a time anyway. Because, really, nothing has changed. Group violence has been directed at one person, rather than being dispersed but the cycle of violence has not been ended, only appeased for a time.

We might look at the story of Jesus' crucifixion using that concept of a scapegoat. Jesus was seen as a trouble-maker by the religious order

because he was sympathetic to the people who were suffering:
the farmers made poor as they lost their land to high taxes,
the people forced into crowded housing in cities,
at higher risk for illness and death,
those relocated so that developers could make big profits with new ports.
Jesus wasn't making people discontented –
they were already discontented and he understood why.
He challenged those who made money their god,
and those who choose to bow to power;
he responded to those who were ill with healing touch,
he understood the hardships of unemployment and poverty.
Jesus was not creating the conditions of unrest –
those were a part of the economic and social upheaval of the time –
but Jesus did not hide from the suffering of so many people.
Because he understood the sufferings,
he made life uncomfortable for religious leaders who benefited
from cooperating with the Roman authorities;
he annoyed the Roman authorities who did not like social unrest.
When the crowd outside Pilate's palace choose to have Barrabas released,
and allow the case against Jesus to continue,
Jesus is being made a scapegoat –
he will be sacrificed in the hope that order will be restored
and life return to "normal" ...at least till the cycle of violence begins again.

The question for us who worship today is this:
who is it, hanging on that cross?

Scapegoat or Passover Lamb?

Is Jesus the victim of violence, in a world that uses force and poverty to control people?

Is Jesus the lamb slaughtered at Passover, sacrificed that others might live?

Is Jesus offered to appease an angry God?

Or is Jesus the one who puts an end to the cycle of violence -
by offering his life

by choosing not to respond to violence with violence?

Is Jesus the innocent Passover Lamb

whose life is given so that others might have life?

Lamb of God,

who takes away the sin of the world,

have mercy on us.

Is Jesus the one who, by dying, shows us God -

not a god of ugly temper and anger demanding appeasement -

but God willing to love, no matter the cost?

Who do we worship as we come to the cross – and why?

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