

April 19, 2019 – Exodus 12:1-14 (Good Friday)

I saw a video a while back. It was a group of young adults – in their 20's, I think – who were born and raised in the city. They had spent their entire lives in an urban environment. And they were all taken out into the country to be shown the life cycle of a chicken.

They started all the way back to taking fertilized eggs and putting them into an incubator. And then they watched chicks as they hatched. They fed and cared for chickens as they grew to adulthood. They collected eggs from the adult hens. And so on.

All the way up to the point when the chickens were ready to be killed and butchered. And they did that too. None of them were vegetarians. And, to their credit, none of them swore off eating chicken after they were done. In fact, they took the chickens they had killed, cooked them over a camp fire, and ate them.

Each of them commented on how remarkable it was to fully understand what had gone into providing them a simple chicken sandwich. How hard it was to kill and butcher the chicken they had been handed. But how it made them appreciate all the more what they were eating.

I can only imagine what that would be like. I personally don't have much experience with it. Aside from helping to clean fish when I was a kid and dissecting a frog in high school, I don't have much experience with butchering animals.

And they were just killing chickens. How much harder would it be to kill a sweet, innocent, little lamb, like the Israelites in our Old Testament lesson? All I can think of is that newborn goat that Wayne brought in for our last church picnic. It's cute little face and its plaintive cries.

Of course, these lambs weren't newborns, but they were still only a year old. At one year old, they hadn't been sheared yet. They certainly hadn't had young yet. Nor were they producing milk, of course.

I can't imagine even the most calloused farmer could look at a one year old lamb and not feel a twinge of guilt for slaughtering it. Even if you didn't think it was adorable looking, you'd at least consider the wasted potential here.

These were perfect, spotless, year old lambs. Lambs without any disease or defect. The cream of the crop. The ones you would expect would give years and years of wool and milk and more little lambs. Before finally being butchered only when they were at their fullest size and maturity.

But God doesn't want sheep and goats that are 5, 10, 15 years old to be slaughtered on Passover. No, he wants the year old lambs. He's very specific about it.

Because he wants this to be a sacrifice. Not just an ordinary meal of roast sheep or goat that they say is special because it falls on the 10th day of the first month of the year. No, he wants them to sacrifice a beautiful, productive animal before it can even reach adulthood. And feel that twinge of heartache and wasted potential as they do so.

This is their sacrifice for getting out of Egypt. This is their guarantee that the angel of death won't come to their home. And as expensive as it may be to sacrifice a year old lamb in this way, it's nothing compared to the price the Egyptians will soon be paying.

It's nothing compared to the cries of grief that will soon be echoing through the land of Egypt. As those who rejected the God of Israel wake up to find their firstborn children dead in their beds. As they find their husbands and wives. Their fathers and mothers. Even the firstborn of their livestock. Dead. It may be hard to slaughter a year old lamb. But when the choice is between that lamb or your child, it becomes a pretty easy decision to make.

It was a grief the Israelites would not have to experience. What was a time of tremendous sadness for Egypt was a time of joy for the Israelites. The blood of that lamb had protected their homes.

You know the story, I think. When the angel of death travelled through Egypt, he would go to the door of every home. If the door had no blood on it, he would enter in and strike down the firstborns within. It would be a doorway to death.

But if the door had blood on it, he would passover the home. Leave it untouched. So that, in the morning, when Pharaoh was finally forced to free the Israelites, that doorway would become a doorway to life. To freedom. To the promised land. All because an innocent lamb had died to give them that life.

As God had commanded, the Passover would become a feast to the Lord throughout all generations. Many more festivals to the Lord would be commanded throughout scripture. Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah, Purim, and the rest. But Passover was the very first one God created. And it would, in fact, become the highest, more important festival of the entire year.

Everyone celebrated the passover. Everyone even did their best to go to Jerusalem itself to celebrate the Passover, even if they lived far away. The Gospel of John actually counts down the years of Jesus' ministry by listing the first, second, and third Passover that he celebrated after he turned thirty years old.

And so, it cannot be coincidence that when John the Baptist sees Jesus, he looks at him and says, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Not 'the sacrifice of God who takes away the sin of the world.' The Lamb of God. There's only one sacrifice that requires a lamb.

It cannot be coincidence that when the Apostle John has heaven revealed to him, what he sees is a Lamb sitting on the throne, looking as if it had been slain. Every one of John's readers knew the one day of the year when lambs are slain.

Paul spells it out for us in 1 Corinthians 5. Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. An innocent lamb. Perfect and spotless. Without the disease or defect of sin. A lamb that was butchered long before old age. As Isaiah says, he was a lamb led to the slaughter. Cut off from the land of the living before he could have descendants.

In human terms, to kill him was a complete waste of potential. Even if the religious leaders didn't believe he was the Son of God, how could they possibly look into his eyes and want to kill an innocent man in cold blood? Even doing that to an animal could cause a twinge of guilt. But in their pride and hate, they did it to a human being.

Which just shows that the sinful human heart is corrupt to the core. It is a prison worse than Egypt. It is a slavery worse than a lifetime of baking bricks. It is more stubborn, stiff-necked, hard-hearted than Pharaoh himself. It deserves to die. We deserve to die.

We may think ourselves better than those Jewish leaders. We may think we would never condemn an innocent man to death. But Jesus says that whatever we do to the least of our neighbors we do to him.

How many of you have hated a neighbor in your heart? How many of you have ignored someone in need? How many of you have hoarded wealth while others went without their basic needs met? How many of you have been consumed by pride, or lust, or envy? You didn't just do these things to yourself or your neighbor. You did them to Jesus.

We each deserve to have the angel of death come to our house this night and strike us down. We each deserve to have the doorway of our hearts be a doorway to death. We each deserve to have this weekend be a weekend of grief and sorrow for those we love and for ourselves. Dead in our sins.

But thanks be to God, a sacrifice has been made. The Lamb of God has been killed in our place. An innocent man has died for those who are guilty. The innocent God has died for his creation.

His blood has been wiped on the doorframes and lintels of our hearts. And now the angel of death passes over us. We may still walk through that doorway at the end of our mortal lives. But it is now a doorway to life. To freedom. To the promised land. All because the Lamb of God died to give us his eternal life.

And his death has become a feast to the Lord throughout all generations. A feast we celebrate from this altar. A festival we celebrate on this blessed Good Friday. A memorial that we keep every day of our lives, whenever we turn to him for grace.

Because a sacrifice has been made. And it wasn't our sacrifice for God. No, it was his sacrifice for us. An innocent death by which we are freed from prison. Freed from slavery. Freed so that we may go. And have new life. Amen.