

Maundy Thursday

April 2, 2026

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Do you have a complicated friend? Not a betrayer. Not an undependable or a fair-weather friend. But someone who complicates your life for just the opposite reason. Someone you trust so deeply that when they do something you don't understand, even something that offends you, you don't walk away from the friendship. You assume there must be something more to the story. Something more to the person, even. And so you stay.

I sometimes feel like the Bible is that kind of complicated friend. Don't you? And I'm not sure there's any story in the Bible that shakes that friendship up more than the Passover.

God hardening Pharaoh's heart, apparently so that only more terrible plagues can be visited upon the Egyptian people, culminating in that terrible night when the firstborn of all creatures in the land were lost. Except for those whose households performed a strange ritual involving lambs' blood on their doorposts. I'd like to just turn away from all this horror. But it's not only that this story is in the Bible. It's that it sits at the very center of the faith and self-understanding of my Jewish friends. I don't think I can dismiss it without dismissing them.

There's also the fact that Jesus and his friends, as faithful, observant Jews, were preparing for Passover on the night before he died. They were remembering the deliverance of their ancestors from slavery, just as Jews here in Memphis and around the world did at sundown last night, at the first Seder of Passover for this year. I'm sorry, Christian friends. I just don't think this is a story we can walk away from. So tonight we stay.

When we do that, here's the first thing we may see: the quiet ritual of a common meal. It's easy to pass over this detail. It's easy to forget that there are many other options for how to put together a life after your exodus from the rule of an unjust tyrant besides sitting down to dinner with other people. The most obvious would be to exact whatever revenge you can on your former oppressors. But Jesus and his friends were not preparing for a Passover week in which Jewish hatred for Egyptians would be stoked up and made fresh all over again. We Christians should be especially mindful that vengeance, even violence, is always a possibility. Too many Christians in too many centuries walked out of church on Good Friday, having just heard the story of the terrible injustice done to Jesus at Calvary, only to hunt down Jews and kill them in the name of the Prince of Peace.

The Passover meal, from its beginning back in Egypt, was meant to be a way of remembering in which a violent past was not denied or repressed. But it was a way of remembering that led to fellowship, not vengeance. It led to friendship, nourishment, kindness. Not enmity. Not hostility. Not more violence.

Rene Girard says the Bible is a single, dynamic movement away from sacrifice. So there are pivotal moments, often catastrophic and chaotic, when a previous system of

sacrifice collapses, making room for something new. What can get buried in the terrible details of the Passover story is that the deaths of all those lambs in Egypt were not sacrifices in any ordinary sense of the word. They were not offerings to appease the wrath of a god. They were each the main course in a shared meal.

Did you notice this line: "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." In other words, no one is being asked to offer up even a serving of their dinner lamb to God. In the midst of a violent, unjust, and chaotic world, God wants us to sit down and eat with each other.

And this will be the way Jews continue to remember that their deliverance from Egypt was not the result of their great bravery or skill at making war. Their deliverance was not a result of paying the bloody price a hungry god demanded. To put some of the blood from a shared meal on your doorpost, is not the same thing as offering blood for the remission of sins. All it proves is that you ate with your household and maybe some neighbors that night, just as you were instructed.

I don't pretend that this solves the moral dilemma of how a God of love could be described as God is described in the Exodus, any more than the near sacrifice of Isaac neatly set aside the practice of child sacrifice. But I do think it can be important to ask not only what is happening in a sacred story, but where is the story taking us. What's being left behind, and what's being taken up? I think Girard is right that in so many of the great hinge moments in the Bible, the story sets aside a form of sacrifice and moves toward communion.

I still need to learn from this movement. Too often I respond to the relatively minor injustices in my sheltered life, with vengeance and the need for someone to pay. Even a dose of humiliation would begin to settle our score. The sacrificial mindset is still alive and well in me, I'm afraid. Too often I respond with a wish for retribution or a demand for sacrifice, when ... and I think I mean this literally before I mean it any other way ... God's desire is still that I learn to respond to whatever pain I've suffered, not by inflicting sacrificial pain back on the one who hurt me, but by setting the table for a sacred, common meal.

When I remember this astonishing move that the first Passover made, and which every subsequent Passover Seder reenacted, I see that, on Maundy Thursday, Jesus was not offering a departure from the old story. He was just carrying it further forward, just as generations before him had.

On the night before he died, before the festival of the Passover, we're told, Jesus didn't gird his loins for battle with the emperor's army on Good Friday. He "tied a towel around himself. 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." Jesus pushed the story further toward communion, and showed us what perfect love looks like. He showed us what the love of God for each of us looks like. It's a love that doesn't only set aside the need for sacrifice. It's a love that will even set aside its own seat at the table, set aside its privilege, its power,

even its precious dignity, if need be, so it can kneel down and give of itself for the sake of its beloved. No matter how dusty and looked down upon the physical work of love may be.

Can you see how Jesus was just taking this sacred story, our sacred story, further in the direction it had been moving all along? From a world of sacrifice, to a meal of communion, to the way of unconditional love?

Is this not the way Jesus called us to when he said, "Follow me"? Is his way not to set aside the old human need for retribution, set aside the image of a god who demands sacrifice, and take your place at the table Jesus has set for us all? And if we stay with him, if we let him lead us even further toward the communion we were created for, he will show us that we can only save our lives by letting them go. By losing ourselves in acts of care and lovingkindness.

Maybe think of it this way. On the night before you die, who do you want to be? Do you want to spend your last breaths calling for retribution, demanding repayment and sacrifice for the wrongs you've suffered? Or do you hope to be found giving whatever is left of your life away, giving your love and care to serve a need, and then taking your place the table of communion to which God is, even now, even tonight, inviting us all?