

The Life of Moses: Passover

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on 29 August 1999. Scripture Lesson: Exodus 12:1-14; Matthew 18:15-20.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

“When I go into the operating room,” a heart surgeon said, “I pray that my hands will be steady. One slip of my hands, one false move, one mistake may be disastrous. I pray that my hands bring life, not death.” I come to the pulpit this morning, like that surgeon. Words are like a scalpal. Words can bring life or death. A slip of the tongue, a word unwisely spoken, may lead to despair rather than to life. One verse in our reading requires the use of careful words to lay bare it’s meaning in such a way that it leads to life. Chapter 12, verse 12. The Lord is speaking. “I will pass through the land of Egypt and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt.”

Many of us are familiar with an interpretation of that verse which I first heard as a young boy sitting in church. The preacher said that God was paying back the Egyptians for what they had done to the children of Israel. Pharaoh commanded all the Jewish boy babies to be drowned in the Nile. So God strikes down all the Egyptian first-born. His sermon troubled me as a small boy. It troubles me now. The image of God as a cosmic child abuser, who kills children to punish their parents, does not set well with me.

William Barclay was broadcasting a sermon over the BBC years ago. He preached on Jesus and the Stilling of the Storm on the Sea of Galilee. He explained that the miracle stories in the Gospel were often not so much stories of what Jesus once did, but symbols of what he still can do. He said that if Jesus stilled a storm on the Sea of Galilee in AD28, it meant very little to him. “Years ago,” he said, “our twenty-one year old daughter and her fiancée were both drowned in a boating accident.” Barclay said, “God did not stop that accident at sea, but he did still the storm in my own heart, so that somehow my wife and I came through that terrible time on our own two feet.” The following week Barclay received an anonymous letter. “Dear Dr. Barclay, *I know now why God killed your daughter*, it was to save her from being corrupted by your heresies.” *I know now why God killed your daughter*. Barclay’s initial response was

blazing anger. Then he said, "If I had that writer's address, I would have written back, not in anger but *in pity*, and I would have said, 'Your God is my devil.' The day my daughter was lost at sea there was sorrow in the heart of God."

And so I believe. The night those Egyptian children died there was sorrow in the heart of God. And when Albanian and Serbs kill one another's children, God's heart aches. When Israeli and Arabs kill one another's children, God weeps. When Presbyterians and Roman Catholics in Northern Ireland kill one another's children, Jesus Christ is crucified afresh. If we take what the Bible says *literally* in Exodus 12:14 it leads directly to the killing fields of Cambodia. How can we trust or love a God who punishes his enemies by killing their children? **There's got to be a better way of affirming the Bible as the Word of God.**

Look at what I have in my hand! [Hold up picture of Kay]. Visitors sometimes come into my study downstairs and say, "Who is that beautiful woman." "My wife, Kay." But not even the most literal minded child believes this is Kay. The picture does not do Kay justice. Kay is alive. She lives and breathes and loves and gets angry and laughs and cries. Kay is a person. She's so much more than a picture. A picture is two dimensional. A picture is frozen at one moment in time. You can study the picture and learn some things about Kay, but you'll never know Kay simply by studying her picture. You need to meet Kay in order to know her and the picture may help you to recognize her.

We read the Scripture lesson a few moments ago. We said, "This is the word of the Lord." And it *is* the word of the Lord *in the sense that this picture is Kay - but only in that sense.* The Word of God is a living, loving and active person, not a book. We read in the Gospel of John that the Word of God became flesh and lived among us full of grace and truth. The written word of God is meant to point us to the Living Word of God, Jesus Christ. The written Word of God doesn't really do justice to the Living Word. The written Word of God is two dimensional and frozen in time. It's important to study the written Word of God and to bring to bear all the power of our intellect on its contents. But we can study the written Word of God and never

come to know or even think of the Living Word of God. Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit uses the Bible to point unerringly to Jesus Christ, the Living Word.

And what do we see when we look to Jesus Christ as the Living Word? Jesus, the Living Word, welcomed little children and blessed them. He chided his disciples who wanted to send them away. He healed children. He never struck them. He raised children from the dead, he didn't kill them. He raised from the dead, not only children of Jews, but children of Pagans. Jesus, the Living Word, warns that if anybody harms one of these little ones it would be better for that person to have a mill-stone placed around his neck and thrown into the deepest sea. Jesus, the Living Word, said that whenever we feed, clothe, or visit one of the least of these his brothers and sisters we do so to him.

If our Old Testament Scripture lesson truly is the written Word of God it will point us to the Living Word, Jesus Christ. Any interpretation which contradicts the Living Word, Jesus Christ, must be rejected.

The early Christians knew this. They had no Bible but the Old Testament. And they found Jesus Christ everywhere in the Old Testament. Listen to a brief quotation from Gregory of Nyssa, a fourth century bishop and theologian. He's referring to the death of the Egyptian firstborn:

How would a concept worthy of God be preserved in the description of what happened if one looked only to the history? The Egyptian acts unjustly, and in his place is punished his newborn child, who in his infancy cannot discern what is good and what is not. His life has no experience of evil... He does not know to distinguish between his right hand and his left.... If such a one now pays the penalty of his father's wickedness, where is justice? Where is piety? Where is holiness?... How can the history so contradict reason?"

Gregory goes on to show how we miss the purpose unless we allow the passage to point us to Jesus Christ. The Lamb points us to Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. The blood on the wooden doorposts and the lintel points us to the blood and the wood of the cross of Christ. The roasted lamb that is eaten points us to the sacrament of Holy Communion and to Jesus who said, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood will live forever." The death of the first born points us to Jesus Christ, the Firstborn of Creation, the Firstborn from the dead, whose death opens the gates of heaven to all believers.

The purpose of the written Word of God is to lead us to Jesus Christ. **The Risen Christ is present** with us every week and yet we so easily miss his unseen presence. He's present in the sacrament of **Holy Communion**. He's present in the sacrament of **Holy Baptism**. He's present in the **reading and the preaching of the Word**. We come to the sanctuary not simply to hear a sermon, to sing hymns, and to fellowship with one another but to encounter the Living Word, the Lord Jesus Christ. If we do not encounter the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit we've missed everything.

Emile Cailliet, a Frenchman by birth, taught philosophy at Princeton Seminary years ago. A brilliant man. A godly Christian. He used his brilliant mind to defend the intellectual integrity of the Christian faith and point people to Jesus Christ. In his autobiography *Journey into Light* he tells us that he had absolutely no Christian upbringing. Educated in the ^{French} universities in France yet he'd never even opened a Bible until he was an adult. He fell in love and married a Scottish girl, a Presbyterian. One day she brought home a Bible. "What's that?" "A French Bible." "A Bible! Let me see it! I've never read the Bible." He took Bible into his study, opened it randomly to the *Gospel of John*, and began reading. He read and read and read. When he finished the *Gospel of John* he went back to *Matthew*. He read deep into the night. He did not stop reading until he read the entire New Testament. Later he wrote, "As I read I became aware the One of whom the Bible spoke. And the One of whom the Bible spoke, spoke to me. I became aware of an unseen presence, the presence of the Risen Christ." That event marked the beginning of his Christian pilgrimage which eventually led to his conversion, baptism and profession of faith.

May the One of whom the Bible speaks, speak to you.
May my words this morning lead to life. May our corporate worship lead us to encounter the living Word, Jesus Christ. May the One to whom the Bible points be known and recognized by you: *Christ, our Passover, has been sacrificed for us. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The Firstborn of all Creation whose death brings life to all.*

Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, we praise you for the glorious resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. He is the true Passover Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. By his death he destroyed death, and by his rising brought us eternal life. Therefore we praise you, One God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.