That reading from Exodus is a study in external solutions to external problems:

* The people of Israel were suffering horribly at the hands of Pharoah and his minions.
* After trying various other (external) solutions, the Lord decided on this horrible thing—this plague—the killing of all the firstborn children (and animals, to boot) in Egypt.

What kind of deal is that?

What kind of God is that?

The Lord says, “I will rain down a world of hurt on everyone
. . . . but don’t worry. If you just follow these very detailed, specific, complicated instructions . . . you’ll be okay.”

What leads people to believe in such a God? Well, I’ll tell you, at least in my opinion . . . fear. Fear of horrible plagues and pandemics and tsunamis and tornadoes. This is not a compassionate enough God for me. I’m sorry: You paint with blood, and I won’t make mincemeat out of you the way I’m going to with everybody else?

No. Sorry, but that’s not good enough, as far as I’m concerned.

People filled with fear have written these stories.

What are we to think? That God somehow caused this pandemic so we would , , , what? So we would what? Learn again to be fearful of this mighty God? Not I.

I mean, really. Is this the deal? . . . “Oops, sorry, you waited until the 15th day . . . you lose. Or maybe you got the day right but you waited until dusk instead of twilight. You put the blood on only *one* doorpost. Thus, you have not obeyed me, and I am not appeased. It’s off with your head. No, sorry . . . it’s off with the head of your oldest child. And *that’s* the festival I want you to celebrate.”

If you all think I’m out of my mind or have lapsed into utter heresy, let’s just put it down to Covid brain. Though, I gotta tell you, the God in the Exodus story doesn’t seem like someone who would have accepted such a flimsy excuse as that.

In any case I have wandered into territory I do not understand. I certainly get it, that people were trying to make sense of this wonderful, awful, orderly, chaotic world in which we all live.

But please, don’t ask me to find meaning in this barbarous scene.

Now Paul wrote of another formula, for a different kind of sacrifice in one of his letters to the Corinthians. But this time it’s not dead babies, but a dead Lord. What a difference! One reason we have this reading from First Corinthians tonight is that John doesn’t mention bread and wine—the Body and Blood of Christ—at all. He’s the only one of the four evangelists (gospellers) who omit that detail. And yet it’s John’s version of the Last Supper we read *every* year of our three-year lectionary on Maundy Thursday.

That’s curious, don’t you think? On the night we celebrate the institution of the Holy Eucharist (Lord’s Supper, Holy Communion, etc.) we read from the only gospel that fails to mention the *words* of institution, “This is my body. This cup is the new covenant in my blood.”

By the way, Paul says something quite striking right after that: “as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”

What is *that* all about? Proclaim his *death*? Whatever else that means, it is in stark contrast to the deaths of firstborn children.

Now *that’s* a God I can get behind. God, in the very same package as every one of us—this bag of flesh and bones—who dies, like every one of us. Not threatening us with death if we get the instructions wrong, or even if we willfully disobey them (because this God is big on forgiveness). This is a God who says to us, “I will go the distance with you.” And it’s the “with you” that is on the marquee on this night we know as Maundy Thursday. Maundy, of course, means mandate or commandment. And the commandment this night is not, “Follow these complex instructions or I’ll *get* you”—*worse*: I’ll get your *children*.”

Tonight’s commandment is this, right there in John’s gospel. It’s a new commandment: “Love one another. Just as I have love you, you should love one another.”

It’s simple. Far from *easy*, of course, but a simple commandment: “Love each other.” In fact, it’s like the opposite of easy. It’s easy until we don’t agree, or your needs and desires get in the way of my needs and desires. And then it gets to be quite difficult.

Maybe that’s why Jesus acted it out instead of just saying, “You should really take care of each other, help each other out.” Nope, he waits until *after* he’s washed their feet to lay this on them.

They still have that uncomfortable—embarrassing even—image in their mind’s eye. I know, because it’s always a little uncomfortable and embarrassing even these 2,000 years later to ask folks if I can wash their feet, or to have your feet washed. I mean, after all, Jesus has been their teacher and mentor and leader for three years. It makes his washing their feet even more affecting, powerful, and poignant. They’ll never forget *that* lesson, more because of the washing than because of the words, I suspect.

In John it’s as if the basic elements of bread and wine are taken for granted. Of course we know that—the three gospels that had already been written spelled that out. But John seems to be telling us, “*This* is what it’s all about! Not cowering behind bloodstained doorways, grateful that a death-dealing God will pass over *your* house, but seeing love incarnate, kneeling before his students and washing their feet.” And, just a few hours later, not withholding *any* thing, not even his own life, to show the world that love is more powerful than death.

I started off talking about external solutions to external threats.

Jesus shows his disciples, including us, that he offers us an internal, deeply felt solution to all our problems. Because it is on the inside that we experience fear, anger, guilt, and all the rest. And he shows us the remedy for all of it—love that is stronger than death. + + +