This is not a pretty picture of God. The story of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt is the flips side of the destruction of just about everybody else. It sounds almost casual, offhand:

Oh, I’ll pass over you on my way to kill all the baby boys in Egypt. In fact, be really careful to follow my instructions, or your babies might be unintentionally killed as well. Just do what I say and the plague (the pandemic) will hit everybody else. But lucky you, you’ll be okay. And when you remember this in the future, whoop it up. It’s a fiesta, a festival.

Can there be any doubt that the people who told these stories and those who—much later—wrote them down had a hand in the way the story got told?

So much for the theory—still extant—that those who “wrote” the Bible were mere stenographers, taking dictation from God, word for word. Or we’d better *hope* that theory holds no water. Because I don’t want any part of this, thank you very much.

It’s one thing to talk about divine inspiration and quite another to speak of the dictated, inerrant word of God.

And don’t start on the “yeah, but this is the Old Testament God.” Some of the New Testament characterizations of God are pretty violent and unforgiving as well. And it’s not just Revelation.

Granted, the juxtaposition of tonight’s readings certainly shakes out on the side of the New Testament and the Gospel and its central character, Jesus.

We’re told not to pick and choose the parts of Scripture that most appeal to us. I’ve said that myself more than a few times. Well, I have to out myself as a picker and chooser of the first water. I’ve pretty much had it with trying to explain away those difficult passages, with being a kind of PR agent for the Judeo-Christian God. Or God. Period. Or the folks who set down the words in the Bible.

We humans have such a penchant for something we term “justice” or “fairness,” especially insofar as it means punishing someone who has wronged me (by my definition, even if I had a hand in evoking the bad temper or bad behavior of the bad person who needs to be punished). Maybe *especially* if I played some part in the situation, the part I’d rather overlook. Hellfire? Damnation? Bring it on—for those awful people. *Kill* the Egyptian babies!

There might have been some historical occurrence that jibes with this plague. If I ever knew of such a thing, I’ve long since forgotten it. And I’m not looking it up now, either. Because either way there were human beings who wrote down this account with its particular interpretive slant. I just can’t believe in the justice here. I can’t believe in a hellfire that’s worse than what I do to myself. Punishment that lasts for ever? No thank you. Doesn’t promote any feelings of worship, or motivation for me.

The backdrop for the action in tonight’s gospel is that salvific event, the Passover of the angel of death, the story of God’s saving the people of Israel, God’s chosen people. There’s some scholarly debate over whether the meal in this scene was a Passover meal, or Seder, or something else, an agape meal. There’s no debate about its having taken place at the time of the Passover celebration. That’s the reason these large crowds are assembled in Jerusalem. The sights and sounds and smells of the festival are all around.

What Jesus chooses to do (here I go, picking and choosing again)—what Jesus chooses to do is pretty much the opposite of killing baby boys as a way to save the faithful Israelites. Many then, as now, weren’t really on board with Jesus’ “wash-each-other’s-feet” and “love-each-other-as-I’ve-loved-you” approach. They had expected Jesus to be a ruthless rebel to lead the overthrow of those horrible Romans (reminiscent of the horrible Egyptians, of course). Others were afraid not just that he would attempt to do that, but even that those in authority might *think* that was his agenda. Yet another group—primarily those in charge of the Temple—were afraid that he threatened to reduce or eliminate their authority and power and wealth. They—those corrupt leaders, not the rank-and-file faithful Jews—were the ones we’ll read about again tomorrow. They whipped up the crowd into a frenzy, calling for Jesus’ blood.

So, yeah, background, backdrop. Against that backdrop Jesus made some clear decisions about how to spend his last night, his last meal, with his closest friends and companions. He was humanly astute enough (no divine crystal-ball gazing here) to know that things had finally come to a head. Here, with all these competing groups. Here, at the festival of the Passover.

His decision was to get his closest friends together to break bread, to have a simple dinner together. He knew, also, what he was going to do afterward, so he very deliberately told them, “*This* is what you should do when you set out to remember me and what I’ve taught you.”

How could he most dramatically and strategically impress this upon them?

He said, “This bread? When you sit down together to remember what I’ve been about, what you now are all about? *This* bread? It’s not bread. It’s *me*. This wine? Same thing. It is I. When you have *this* meal together in the future, I am as close to you as I am now, as close to you as the bread you eat and wine you drink. They, after all, become part of your body. In this meal become part of you—body *and* spirit. Every time you do this.”

You and I will undoubtedly remember those words with particular poignancy and awe the next time we share this sacred meal together.

Well, after that speech at supper, to remind them of what he had come into the world to do, and what he intends for them (and us) to do, he washed their feet, like some kind of bathroom attendant. But one who really cares about and loves the people he’s serving.

Then, as if putting his words and actions in bold and italic and underlined, he says, “Just as I have love you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Then, he takes his disciples to the garden to pray.

After that he is betrayed, hauled off to a kangaroo court and is executed. But that is the subject for tomorrow evening. + + +