

A SERMON FROM ST STEPHEN'S

BEHOLD, THE LAMB OF GOD

A sermon preached the 15th of January 2017, the Second Sunday after the Epiphany, at St Stephen's Episcopal Church, Belvedere, CA, by the Rev'd Phillip Channing Ellsworth, Jr., Rector. Based on Isaiah 49. 1 – 7, and John 1: 29 – 42.

The Lord made my mouth like a sharp sword;
in the shadow of his hand he hid me.
And he made me as a polished arrow;
in his quiver he concealed me.

— Isaiah 49. 2

Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

— John 1: 29

Behold, the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world.” Part II of Handel’s oratorio, *Messiah*, opens with a sombre setting of John’s lyric. Our choir will sing it this morning. In the liturgy of the Book of Common Prayer, the *Agnus Dei* comes just after the *Pascha Nostrum*, “Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us.” All this will be unfurled on Palm Sunday. We’ll see Jesus deliberately stage his triumphal entry into Jerusalem to coincide not with Groundhog Day or the Winter Solstice but the festival of death out of life and life out of death.

The imagery is ‘there’ in the book of Exodus where we read of God’s people being delivered out of bondage in Egypt at Passover. The Lord commanded through Moses that his people would sacrifice a lamb and daub its blood over the doorposts and lintel of the house in which they were living. The Lord would protect them thereby from the angel of death.

That was the original Passover, and it was celebrated on the first day of the Feast of Passover. The seven days that followed this were called the Feast of the Unleavened Bread. Passover inaugurates the feast; the seven days that follow are its consummation. During those seven days, Israel was not to partake of anything with leaven in it, because in the Passover of their deliverance, they fled Egypt with such haste that they didn’t have time to allow their bread to rise.

Jesus timed his entry into Jerusalem with Passover because he went there to die. In Mark’s gospel [Mark 10],

we read, “They were on the way up to Jerusalem with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. ‘We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles who will mock him and spit on him, flog him, and kill him.’”

The Sanhedrin, the legal assembly of the ancient Temple court and the final authority on Jewish law, decided not to arrest Jesus during Passover [Matthew 26], afraid that to do so might inspire a revolutionary attempt to overthrow the Romans. But in one irony among many, the betrayal of Jesus by one of his own disciples kept Jesus’ death on time with Passover.

Jesus underscores this identification of his death and the death of the Passover lambs by his own inauguration of the Lord’s Supper on the original Maundy Thursday. “When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table, and he said to them, ‘I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.’” [Luke 22] The original Holy Communion was a Passover meal. Jesus gives it new meaning, redefining the symbolism. He says to them of the bread, “This is my body which is given for you, do this in remembrance of me.” He says of the cup, “This is my blood of the new covenant.”

God guarded his people with his own presence at Passover. In Exodus [12. 12, 23], “It is the Lord’s passover. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will smite all the first-born in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. The blood shall be a sign for you, upon the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall fall upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt. . . . For the Lord will pass through to slay the Egyptians; and when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the Lord will pass over the door, and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to slay you.”

The word ‘passover’ is William Tyndale’s translation of *pesach*. Some Bibles translate it ‘hover over’. The term is used elsewhere of hovering birds. So Isaiah [31. 5]: “As a bird hovering, so the Lord of hosts will protect Jerusalem; he will protect and deliver it; he will spare and *pesach* it.” The 3rd- and 2nd-century Greek translation of the Old Testament called the *Septuagint*, translates it ‘protect’. That’s Passover: through the life of a lamb laid down, God protecting his people from his own wrath.

We have a hard time making emotional sense of this because we’re not pastoralists. We don’t raise sheep, so we struggle to find parallels. But for ancient Jews, whilst the law didn’t require vegetarianism, in practice people rarely ate meat. In a semi-arid climate before refrigerators, people didn’t eat meat except on rare occasions. Normally, a sheep was kept for the provision of wool and milk. It wasn’t for their meat. This is why shepherds were ready to lay down their lives for their sheep. A young David risked his life when a bear or a lion would attack his sheep. You wouldn’t do that for an animal you’re planning to kill anyway.

So the closest parallel I can think of is my golden retriever Maddie, of blessed memory. Nathan the prophet tells a parable of a man who has a lamb that he keeps in his house and sleeps by in his bed. Madeline Hotspur was to me and my family such a lamb. On Passover, the Lord required his people to offer up theirs. That had to be excruciatingly painful.

All of this is in the verbal echo chamber, the scriptural background, of our Gospel reading. John sees the Spirit of God descend on Jesus like a dove, hovering over the Lamb of God. That rang bells in the minds of every Jew who was there.

One bell it rang is struck by the lectionary, shrewdly pairing that Isaiah reading with today’s Gospel. It isn’t always so astute; here, it has excellent company. Early Church fathers such as Gregory of Nyssa, and rock star preachers like John Donne, careful readers of holy scripture, see in Isaiah’s ‘servant’ a ‘spitting image’ of Jesus. “In the shadow of the Lord’s hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away.”

By the time John declares, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,” Jesus has lived in obscurity for thirty years. He’s dwelt in an out-of-the-way place, Nazareth. Hidden in God’s hand, concealed like an arrow in a quiver, he’s been sharpened and polished, riding on God’s back. In the language of both archery and the theatre, he’s waited to hit his mark. Here, at our Epiphany, he is taken from the shadows of God’s hand. And now, this is what is put before your eyes. The God of Isaiah, the God of John the Baptist, stretching out his mighty arm, takes Jesus, the arrow in his quiver, and sets him to the bow.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

St Stephen’s Church welcomes you to worship with us at 3 Bay View Avenue, Belvedere, CA, Sunday mornings at 8 or 10 o’clock. For more information about our life and mission please email us at office@ststephenschurch.org, call us at 415-435-4501, or visit us at www.ststephenschurch.org