

THE REDEMPTION OF THE FIRSTBORN

Exodus 13:1-3a, 11-15

First Sunday after Christmas (Series C)

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The Old Testament lesson for the First Sunday after Christmas comes from the second book of Moses, which we commonly refer to as Exodus, chapter 13. We'll start with verses 1 through 3 and then skip down to verses 11 through 15. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From Exodus 13, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ The LORD said to Moses, ²“Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine.”

³ Then Moses said to the people, “Remember this day in which you came out from Egypt, out of the house of slavery, for by a strong hand the LORD brought you out from this place. ...

¹¹ “When the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites, as he swore to you and your fathers, and shall give it to you, ¹² you shall set apart to the LORD all that first opens the womb. All the firstborn of your animals that are males shall be the LORD's. ¹³ Every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. Every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem. ¹⁴ And when in time to come your son asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ you shall say to him, ‘By a strong hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. ¹⁵ For when Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the LORD killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD all the males that first open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.’

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Well that doesn't sound very Christmassy. Christmas is supposed to be about babies and angels (but not the terrifying kind) and peace on earth. It's not supposed to be about the LORD killing all the firstborn in Egypt; we'd rather just forget about that and pretend God isn't like that anymore. And donkeys? If there are any donkeys in Christmas, they're supposed to be cute ones, who don't really smell like donkeys, and just stand by the manger humming “Silent Night.” We're certainly not breaking any donkeys' necks. I don't know anyone who does that as a Christmas tradition. So this does not seem like a very Christmassy Bible passage.

But it is actually very appropriate for Christmas, and here's why: It's about the redemption of the firstborn. In order to bring Israel out of slavery in Egypt, the LORD killed all the firstborn sons in Egypt. This included animals as well as humans. And then of the Israelites, when they settled in the land of Canaan, God required their firstborn sons, but instead of killing them, God required them to be redeemed. That is, a lamb was to be offered in their place. And this lamb looked forward to the Son of God, who is the true sacrifice. God redeems the whole world through his Son. When the LORD killed the firstborn in Egypt, and when he required the sacrifice or redemption of the firstborn in Israel, he did not exempt himself. And he actually did these

things as signs of what he had willingly decided to do: offer himself for the sin of the world. At Christmas we see God making good on that promise. That's what this passage has to do with Christmas.

But we still need to consider the nature of God, and especially the issue of God's wrath. Modern sensibilities don't have much room for a God of wrath. We tend to think that our society has progressed beyond old, barbaric ideas. This is what C.S. Lewis called "chronological snobbery." We think that our collective mind and values have evolved beyond primitive beliefs. Maybe people in ancient times feared God. But in modern times, we've discovered that man is really quite good, and God should have no reason to be angry with us. If anything, we should be mad at God for all the garbage in the world. But we're forgetting that we're the ones who put the garbage there. We're like a child saying to its parents, "No! You go to your room!" We pretend that God has no reason to be angry with us.

So we dismiss things like animal sacrifice or the death of the firstborn as ancient superstitions. Bible-believing Christians feel obligated to affirm these things as historically true. But we kind of blush at them. And, in a practical sense, we act like that's the way God used to be, but in the New Testament he has since repented of his former wrath. It's kind of like God the Father had wrath in the Old Testament, but in the New Testament we deal with Jesus instead, and he has no wrath. But this is completely false. We deal with all three persons of the Trinity in both the Old and New Testaments. And all three persons have wrath. And all three persons are also gracious. Both the Old and New Testaments are filled with both wrath and love. The reason the New Testament seems, at times, to be more gracious, is because the wrath of God is pointed in a different direction. It is pointed at the Son of God instead of sinful humans.

But God has not changed. *The Letter to the Hebrews* says, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 13:8). And there's an interesting verse in Jude that says, "That Jesus, who saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe" (Jude 5). We can't even blame the death of the firstborn on God the Father, because the New Testament teaches that it was Jesus who brought Israel out of Egypt, and after he brought them out, it was Jesus who destroyed those who did not believe. Jesus had wrath then, and his nature has not changed. When we talk about the wrath of God, we are not talking about the way God used to be, and we are not talking only about God the Father. We are talking about all three persons of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as they always have been, as they are, and as they always will be. God has wrath.

But we don't want God to have wrath. And the reason for this is obvious. If God has wrath, then there's a possibility that we might end up on the receiving end of it. But whether or not we want God to have wrath is irrelevant. He has it, whether we imagine him that way or not. We have to deal with God as he really is, for there is no other God to deal with.

And if we decide to ignore certain attributes, like his wrath, the rest of our doctrine begins to fall apart. One theologian critiqued American Protestantism this way: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a Kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross" (H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*). And this was almost a hundred years ago. What he saw as a problem then has now multiplied many times over. His point was that if we strip God of his wrath, while trying to keep everything we like, then sin loses its meaning. And if sin loses its meaning, then there is no judgment. And if there is no judgment, then the cross of Jesus loses its entire purpose. The basic question is this: *If God has no wrath, then what in the world was Jesus doing on that cross?* The central event of Christianity

becomes meaningless. And so, if God has no wrath, he's barely even worth paying attention to. We might as well believe and do whatever we want. But God does have wrath, and he has it whether we like it or not.

We should not, however, think of his wrath as an essential attribute. That's kind of fancy theological talk, so I'll explain it a bit. God has certain attributes that are always true about him. We could call these "essential attributes." God is love. That is his most essential attribute. He always acts in love. And God is just. Everything he does is just, and he never acts unjustly. God is also eternal, all-powerful, all-knowing, and sovereign. These are attributes of God that are always true. They are essential to his nature, and they never change. But we do not name wrath among these essential attributes, because God does not always act in wrath. Rather, wrath is a part of God's justice. He sometimes manifests his justice in the form of wrath, but not all the time. He only acts in wrath when it is just to act in wrath. So wrath is one way that God manifests his justice, but it is not the only way.

And since wrath is a manifestation of justice, we should also confess that God's wrath is good. Everything God does is good, whether it seems good to us or not. This might not make perfect sense to you. Sometimes I scratch my head at it too. But we can still confess this to be true. Wrath is a manifestation of justice, and justice is good. So when God drowned most of the world's inhabitants in a flood, that was good. When he destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah with fire, that was good. When he killed all the firstborn in Egypt and then drowned Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea, that was good. Now I'm not saying that these events, taken in their entirety, were good. It was not good that these people died. It would have been better if they had repented, and this is the gracious will of God for them. But since they would not repent, God's actions of wrath were good, because they were manifestations of justice. Sin and unbelief, which provoke God's wrath, are not good. But if we isolate God's action from the rest of it, we can and must confess that God's actions, even his actions of wrath, are always good. God always does what is good and just.

We should also remember that God is the judge of when wrath is necessary. We should not look at some wicked people and say, "Boy, it would be good if God smites them down now." That is not ours to judge. But if God decides to do so, then it will be good. And if he lets us know what he is doing, then we could also say it was good. But there are very few events where God has made this known to us. Really, the only events that we know with any certainty are those recorded in Scripture. And where God has not revealed his will, which is every other event, we must not speculate.

Now, I suppose part of the reason we blush at these Old Testament manifestations of wrath is because God has commanded us not to kill. He commands us to value all human life. So if God commands us not to kill, but then he goes and kills, isn't he a hypocrite? No. For one thing, he is pure, and we are corrupt. He has a right to judge, but we do not.

We also need to consider the reason God commanded us not to kill. It is because man was created in the image of God. In Genesis 9 God says, "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image" (Gen. 9:6). One of the things we see here is that government, as God's instrument of justice, has a right to exercise capital punishment. But most significantly, we see the reason why it is morally wrong to murder another person. It is because they were created in the image of God. We do not have the right to destroy what God has created, especially what he has created in his own image. But this, of course, does

not apply to God. As the Creator, he has every right. When we kill, we are usurping God's authority. God is the one who kills and makes alive (Deut. 32:39). So he is not a hypocrite. When he commands us not to murder, he is protecting what he has created, he is protecting what belongs to him, and he is protecting his right over human life, which he always executes justly.

We see God's wrath in this text, but we also see his concern for life. There's an interesting difference between his commands concerning the firstborn of animals and the firstborn of man.

Among animals, God commands them to sacrifice or kill the firstborn. Donkeys were not used for sacrifices, but since they made great pack animals, they were valuable, so God allowed the Israelites to redeem them with a lamb. That is, they could sacrifice a lamb in the place of a firstborn donkey and keep the donkey. But if they didn't want to redeem the donkey, then they were required to kill it by breaking its neck. This sounds kind of odd. The basic point is that there was no option to ignore God's command. If you wanted to keep the donkey, you could redeem it, but you couldn't keep the donkey without redeeming it. So if they didn't want to redeem it, they were to break its neck. And the best explanation I found for this is that by breaking its neck, you're killing it without shedding its blood, so it wouldn't be a sacrifice. Donkeys were not sacrificial animals. So the people had the option to redeem it or kill it.

But it's different with their sons. God did not give them options. There was only one: redeem him. There's no sacrifice of sons; there's no killing of sons, just redemption. Many other religions at that time did have child sacrifice, but God forbade his people from sacrificing their children. God's desire is to redeem humanity. So animals were sacrificed in their place.

And all of this stuff about the firstborn points forward to the only Son of God. The righteous wrath of God is not really satisfied by firstborn lambs. It would not have even been satisfied by the sacrifice of firstborn sons. And that's not because God's wrath is excessively severe. It is because our rebellion is excessively severe. God's wrath is perfectly commensurate with justice. In his mercy he passed over former sins. And in his mercy he allowed us to be born, all the while knowing that we are corrupt and would continue to rebel against his commands.

But his mercy is not opposed to his wrath. God is not a contradiction. He is consistent, and his wrath is perfectly consistent with his love. Wrath was not just a thing of the Old Testament. But his wrath really finds its fullness and satisfaction in the New Testament, in the death of his only Son, Jesus Christ.

We might blush at the Old Testament manifestations of God's wrath, like the death of the firstborn in Egypt. They were all conceived in sin, just like you and me. But Jesus Christ, the perfect Son of God, is without sin. And yet, "It was the will of the LORD to crush him" (Is. 53:10). Here we see that wrath is not merely a manifestation of God's justice, but in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, wrath is also a manifestation of God's love. On the cross, Jesus bore all of our sins in his body (1 Peter 2:24). And there God condemned all sin in the flesh of his Son (Rom. 8:3). In fact, in the entire scope of history, there has never been and never will be a greater manifestation of God's wrath than the crucifixion of Jesus. And, at the same time, there never has been and never will be a greater manifestation of God's love than this same cross of Jesus. In this supreme act of wrath and love, the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, has redeemed you. Your excessive rebellion against God does not separate you from his love. In his perfect justice, he has poured out all of his wrath over your sin. And in his perfect love, he has also accepted all of that wrath. And you are redeemed. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 2w14:7). Amen.