

**Maundy Thursday Worship Service**  
**Fairlington Presbyterian Church & Fairlington United Methodist Church**  
**Exodus 12:1-14, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, John 13:1-17, 31b-35**

Sermon by Jan Edmiston

April 13, 2006

I'm not one for scary movies. I especially don't like the gratuitously bloody ones. Have never seen "Blade" or "The Evil Dead," or "Robocop" especially the director's cut.

Never seen any of the Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> movies, but I've heard that they are full of massacres and mayhem. There are – I'm told – 11 movies in the whole Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> series now. All with lots of blood.

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So if you're wondering why I'd be talking about bloody movies on this Holy Thursday, it's because the scripture passages for this night seem particularly bloody. Even those of us who don't care for blood and gore find ourselves hearing again stories with quite a bit of blood-spattering action.

If we weren't so numbed by the familiarity of the Passover story, if we didn't know the story of Jesus' torture so well, then we might be quite horrified.

Imagine telling someone who doesn't know anything about God – someone who has never heard these stories before – that our loving Creator long, long ago saved the children of Israel by killing every firstborn in Egypt, innocent people and not-so-innocent people – from the great Pharaoh to the lowly prisoner languishing in his prison cell to the cows in the field<sup>1</sup> -- unless . . . you lived in a home where lamb's blood had been smeared on the doorposts and lintels. Imagine telling that story to someone for the first time.

When the Egyptians arose before dawn that morning after that first Passover, there were screams and cries from every single residence and stable "for there was not a house without someone dead."<sup>2</sup>

This was the *last* of the infamous ten plagues. You might remember that the plagues started with blood when the River Nile became red with hemoglobin.<sup>3</sup> And the plagues ended with blood, as it was smeared blood on the door frame with a bunch of hyssop that very first Passover.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 12:29

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 12:30

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 7:19-24.

<sup>4</sup> Hyssop is the foliage of a wild bush used for sprinkling liquids in religious rituals. See Lev. 14:4 and Numbers 19:6.

And blood factored into this story long before the exodus. At one point, very early in Moses' call to help bring these children of Israel out of slavery, Moses is called "a bridegroom of blood."<sup>5</sup> And so he was.

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As Christians, we don't sing "the blood hymns" much anymore. At least Presbyterians don't.

There was a time when churches everywhere loved the Blood Hymns. Does anyone here remember *There's a Blest Fountain of Blood?*

*There is a blessed fount of blood,  
It flows from Jesus' side;  
And I have plunged my guilty soul  
Beneath its cleansing tide.*<sup>6</sup>

Picture yourself literally plunging your soul into a tide of Jesus' blood. It makes for a very earthy relationship with our Savior, doesn't it?

Or how about this one:

*Have you been to Jesus for the cleansing power?  
Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?  
Are you fully trusting in His grace this hour?  
Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?*<sup>7</sup>

Or this one (which I happen to know is still in the Methodist hymnbook)? It's a great one:

*There is a fountain filled with blood,  
Drawn from Immanuel's veins,  
And sinners plunged beneath that flood  
Lose all their guilty stains.*<sup>8</sup>

The imagery of washing in anyone's blood sounds like something out of a horror movie. But it's a part of our heritage.

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And the blood is not just something we bathe in. We also drink it.

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<sup>5</sup> Exodus 4:26 – Moses is saved by the blood of his son's circumcision. Very odd story.

<sup>6</sup> Lyrics by Daniel O. Teasley, 1911

<sup>7</sup> Lyrics by Elisha A. Hoffman, 1878

<sup>8</sup> Lyrics by William Cowper, 1772

We are numb – to a certain extent – regarding this notion of drinking the blood of Jesus. Whether you consider this a symbolic act (like most of us and most of our other Protestant brothers and sisters) or a literal act (like most of our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters), we forget that the first Christians were often charged with cannibalism - what with all this talk of eating flesh and drinking blood.<sup>9</sup>

It's not known when our Jewish brothers and sisters stopped smearing lamb's blood on their door posts. After that first Passover, Moses said, **“You shall observe this rite as a perpetual ordinance for you and your children.”**<sup>10</sup>

But while the Jews continue to observe by eating *unleavened bread* they have not perpetuated the ritual of smearing blood on their doors.

There is no record of blood-smearing after that first Passover in Egypt. And we are probably happy about that. It's messy and it's disgusting and who would want a neighbor who practices a faith which involves painting the porch with blood every spring?

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Generally speaking, we don't like messiness. We don't like the sight of blood. We certainly don't like the idea of human torture, except for the few who still believe that it's an effective tool to use on suspected terrorists. I pray there are fewer and fewer of those.

We like tender stories, nice stories – like the one about Jesus washing the feet of the disciples. There was water and there was a loving Jesus with a towel tied around his waste washing the feet of the disciples. He even washed Judas' feet.

And whether you believe the Gospel of Judas which contends that Jesus and Judas were best friends or not – it's still true that Judas betrayed his LORD. But Jesus still washed his feet, knowing that Judas would betray him.

**We like the words about service and love. “Love one another,” Jesus said. And we like that. It's so much easier to take than the image of an innocent man tortured and hanging on a cross.**

But the truth is that life is messy. We are messy Christians – at best. Messy disciples.

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<sup>9</sup> From Minucius Felix, Octavius, R. E. Wallis, trans. in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, N. Y.: The Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), Vol. 4, pp. 177-178.

<sup>10</sup> Exodus 12:24.

I hear people say – all the time – “I don’t pray enough.” “I almost never read my Bible.” “I feel really uncomfortable talking about my faith.” “I’m not a very good Christian.”

Michael Yaconelli, former editor of *The Wittenberg Door* wrote a book a few years ago called *Messy Spirituality: God’s Annoying Love for Imperfect People*.

The basic message is this: **Our messes are God’s opportunities.** Debt. Broken relationships. Bad decisions. Poor choices. Terrible priorities. These are the things that make our lives a mess. Maybe not a bloody mess, but a spiritual mess to be sure.

And here’s the kicker: The Bible is full of messy people and God forgave them if they turned to God and asked for help.

“Spirituality is not about being fixed” so that life isn’t messy ever again. “It is about **God’s being present in the mess** of our unfixedness.”<sup>11</sup>

We might be repelled by the sight of blood. We might even turn our eyes away from the sight of our Savior bleeding and dying on a cross. “But Jesus is not repelled by us – no matter how messy” we’ve made our lives.<sup>12</sup>

**Jesus loves us and asks that we love each other.** That’s really it.

We are supposed to love each other even when it’s difficult, even when it’s messy, even if it involves some kind of bloody sacrifice – and I use that term in the British sense – although that might mean I’m swearing and I try not to swear from the pulpit. I mean no disrespect.

What I do mean is that this is Thursday the 13<sup>th</sup>.

Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> is supposed to be a day of bad luck. It’s also the name of a series of movies about a bloodthirsty character who wears a hockey mask.

On this Thursday the 13<sup>th</sup>, perhaps we could begin to live out a series of loving moves in the name of the One who calls us to serve as he served, to love as he loved. This is the blessing and Good News of Holy Week.

May this Thursday the 13<sup>th</sup> be the beginning of something clean and pure and beautiful.

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<sup>11</sup> Yaconelli, Michael. *Messy Spirituality: God’s Annoying Love for Imperfect People*. (Zondervan: Grand Rapids) 2002, page 13.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* page 17.

