

Rev. Dan Welch Good Friday 4-19-19 Text- Exodus 12:1-13

The Ninth Part in the Series

Exodus: Let My People Go!

“Agnus Dei”

In the Prado Museum in Madrid, Spain, you will find this stunning masterpiece. The seventeenth-century Spanish artist Francisco de Zurbarán painted it from 1635 to 1640. He called it *Agnus Dei*—that’s Latin for “Lamb of God.”

The painting is simple: a woolly merino lamb is lying on his side on a grey slab. As we observe the picture, the lamb is facing the left. He has elegantly curved horns. All four of his feet are bound together above the fetlock with two strands of a cord. The knot isn’t visible.

With his feet tied together, the lamb’s back is elevated as he lies on the slab. His left eye (the only one we can see) is open, pale eyelashes delicately line his eye. We can see that the lamb is looking down, past his pink nose, at the grey slab. There is no blood in the painting so the lamb is alive—but the lamb won’t be alive for long.

Still life paintings of the seventeenth century rarely displayed emotion. Not here. Not in the *Agnus Dei*. The lamb shows emotion—the emotion of resignation. He isn’t struggling to free himself. He isn’t kicking and screaming. The lamb is ready to die.

Light shines down on the lamb from the upper left at a high angle, so that only a little shadow is thrown. Beyond the pool of light that bathes the lamb, it is all dark—very, very dark.

We’re in a series on the book of Exodus and today, for Good Friday, we are in Exodus 12. It’s all about the *Agnus Dei*—the Lamb of God. Exodus 12:3–5: “Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household. The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect.” The Passover lamb must be male and he must be perfect—he can’t be crippled, lame, spotted, or off-color.

After choosing the lamb, the people are to guard and watch over him for three days. Then, on the fourteenth day of the month, the entire

community of Israel is to gather at twilight. What happens next? They slaughter the lamb. And then what?

Exodus 12:7: “Then they are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses where they eat the lambs.” The blood of the Lamb will set the people free—free from darkness and death of Egypt.

Look again at the *Agnus Dei*. The black background serves to highlight the lamb’s white wool. Here is a lamb that is perfect and without defect. The dark background, though, does something else. It also highlights the reason the lamb was slaughtered.

Luther famously called it *incurvates in se*—another Latin phrase that means “turned in on self.” In our darkness we turn in toward our own interests and our own desires and our own needs and our own agendas. Call it individualism. Call it narcissism. Call it selfishness. But whatever you call it you must also call it what it is—sin. Sin is dark—sin is very, very dark.

“To turn outward towards God and other people is too risky. I might get hurt and disappointed and frustrated. It’s better, and it’s much safer, to turn towards self.” So we live in a tight, fetal position. It leads to isolation, disconnectedness and despair. Sin—*incurvates in se*—it seduces us, it traps us, and then it kills us.

People sometimes dream that they can enter into paintings. You know, take a walk in the *Starry Night* with Vincent van Gogh or listen to the *Mona Lisa* with Leonardo da Vinci. What would we do if we could enter de Zurbarán’s masterpiece, *Agnus Dei*? The impulse, of course, is to untie the lamb. Let him loose. Allow him to go free. He looks so innocent, so kind, so loving. He doesn’t deserve to die!

But the knot is out of sight. Why is that? What’s going on? The knot is out of sight because the lamb can’t be freed. There is nothing we can do for this lamb. The Lamb must be slaughtered because His blood alone will set us free.

“The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt” (Ex 12:13).

The Lamb's blood flowed again in Gethsemane when, as Luke tells us, Jesus was in such agony that He sweat great drops of blood. You can bet that later on that evening when the guards of the High Priest blindfolded Jesus and began punching Him in the face that there was more blood. And blood flowed from His scalp the next morning as a crown of thorns was shoved onto His head by Roman soldiers.

But the real blood bath was at Gabbatha where our Savior was stripped naked and whipped—whipped without mercy. Blood continued to flow from his open wounds as he carried his cross on the *Via Delarosa*—more Latin, meaning “the Way of Sorrow.” Then there were three nails and the final blow—the Roman spear thrust where there was a sudden flow of blood and water.

The *Agnus Dei* inspired this masterpiece, a marble sculpture. It was created by Stefano Maderno, a seventeenth-century Italian sculptor. It's called Saint Cecilia. Maderno draws on de Zurbarán's uncanny capacity to reproduce textures. A very calculated and directed light creates broad areas of shadow. It helps us concentrate our attention on Saint Cecilia. She, like the lamb, is lying down. She, like the lamb, has her arms tied together. She, like the lamb, is resigned to God's will in her life.

There is one more connection between *Agnus Dei* and Saint Cecilia. Do you see it? Do you see the connection? It's the most important connection of all! The woman is white—*white*. Saint Cecilia is all white, just like the Lamb! What's the point? She is washed clean in the blood of the Lamb.

And so are we! He shed His blood for us, too. By faith, we are washed clean in the blood of Jesus. It's the only way to free us from an eternity of *incurvates in se*—turned in on self.

In the end, at the very end, blood was all Jesus had. His disciples had deserted him. His garments had been gambled away. Even his Father had turned His back. Blood was all Jesus had, but the blood of Jesus is all we need. *The blood of Jesus is all we need!*

Isaac Watts, the great seventeenth-century hymn writer, brings our two seventeenth-century masterpieces together. “Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.” Amen.