One of the things I hear often from those who are young in their faith is that they are overwhelmed and confused about how the Old Testament and New Testament tie together. When you jump in and read a passage in the Bible without any context or overview of biblical history, particularly from the Old Testament, the stories are confusing and seem to hold very little meaning. That's why it's important to get involved in a Bible study or Sunday school class where background information is shared and the Bible comes alive.

As an example, in Genesis 22, the first book of the Bible, God told Abraham to sacrifice (burnt offering) his son on the altar. After Abraham bound Isaac and was about to slay him, God called out to him and said, "Abraham! Wait, don't do it!" When read out of context, God seems barbaric and ambivalent. But when we look at the context, we recognize that there are a couple of things going on here. First, God wanted to know, did Abraham love God above everything else, including his son? And second, for us, the thought of sacrificing one of our children gives us a glimpse of the sacrifice God made for us. He sent his only son to be a sacrifice for us, to save us from our sins.

When we look at the Old Testament in context, we see how God was preparing His people for the Messiah. As twenty-first century readers looking back at the Old Testament, we are able to understand the indications that the Messiah, known to us as Jesus, was on his way and that helps us to understand more clearly the background and reasoning for what we do in worship and the Sacraments.

So context is important and it is with that in mind that we take a look at today's Old Testament reading from Exodus 12. When the Israelites were in Egypt, they were held captive and forced into hard-labor by making bricks out of mud. They were whipped and told that they had to meet certain quotas. It was a horrible life. Slavery is brutal. The Israelites were held captive in bondage to slavery under Pharaoh in Egypt for 430 years. Then God told Moses to go and tell Pharaoh to “Let my people go”. Of course, Pharaoh did not listen, so God sent plagues to plague the Egyptians. Nine of them. Things like frogs, gnats, flies, boils, hail. For nine of the plagues, Moses asked Pharaoh to let the people of God go free and Pharaoh responded that he would not. When God was about to send the tenth plague, He spoke to Moses and told Moses specifically that another plague was coming and this plague was going to be death. God told Moses to gather His people together and provide very specific instructions to them.

Moses gathered all of the people who were faithful to the Lord and gave His instructions. They were to go to their homes and gather a lamb. This was not just any lamb, but they had to gather a perfect lamb without blemish. They had to bring this lamb into their home. If they were a small household they would be invited in by neighbors. The head of the household would take the perfect lamb and slaughter it. This was a big deal. Here's why: A perfect lamb was used to help increase the flock. When it came time to increase the flock, using a defective and deformed animal to breed would create more imperfect animals. A perfect lamb was a prized possession because livestock was their livelihood. God told Moses to tell His people to take that perfect
animal and sacrifice it. Then, they were to take the blood of the animal and put the blood on the
tops and sides of the doors. The lamb was then to be roasted and consumed entirely. Nothing was
to be left for the next day. Leftovers were burned. This may sound like a feast to behold, but they
weren't able to wait for the bread to rise and they were instructed to eat while wearing their
cloak, belt and sandals. This would be the equivalent of wearing a winter coat and boots, with
your suitcase at your side while trying to eat quickly. God wanted the people to be ready to hear
His command to leave Egypt and the unleavened bread was a sign that they couldn't wait even
for bread to rise. The last significant part of the meal was the eating of bitter herbs. The Lord
wanted His people to eat these bitter herbs as a reminder of the bitterness of the bondage of
slavery. All of this was a command, an ordinance, coming from the Lord.

That evening, while the people of God were in their homes eating according to the
command of God, they could hear the loud wailing of the Egyptians as death was sent by the
Lord to take the first born humans and animals, the first fruits of the offspring. The Israelites
were spared because they were protected by the blood of the lamb. As a result, Pharaoh’s heart
was softened, for a time, and he let God’s people go. The Israelites were able to escape. Now
there's more to the story, but let's pause there for a moment.

Verse 12 says that God told them not to forget. “Tell your sons and daughters and the
people of your household.” Every year, as directed by the Lord, the head of the household was to
take the perfect lamb on the tenth day of the month. The head of the household selected the
perfect lamb and for four days he watched the lamb to make sure there were no imperfections.
And on the fourteenth day of the month, the perfect lamb was to be slaughtered. The people were
instructed to, “Do this as an everlasting command from the Lord.”

Throughout the Old Testament we read of people selecting, slaughtering, and eating their
lambs. Whatever was not eaten was consumed in the fire. They ate the bitter herbs and they told
the story of how living under the yoke of slavery in Egypt was horrible. They ate the Matzo
because God told them to be ready. They recalled the time that, in a hurry, they had to leave as
soon as they heard His command.

As time went on, the Temple became the place where God’s people worshipped Him.
The precious blood of the lamb at Passover became so sacred that the priests collected the blood
in gold or silver chalices. The blood was so significant to them because it was the blood that
saved the people from death. Everyone realized that without the shedding of blood, there is no
forgiveness of sins.

Move forward thousands of years and this is the observance that was still being
celebrated during Jesus’ time. Christ was in the upper room with His disciples celebrating the
Passover. They were still eating Matzo (unleavened bread), they were drinking wine, and they
were talking about the yoke of slavery in Egypt. This is where we begin to understand what Holy
Communion means.

When was the perfect lamb for the Passover selected? Biblical scholars suggest that on
the tenth day of the month, Jesus Christ made His Triumphal entry into Jerusalem. How do we
know he was without blemish? Because for the next four days, the Pharisees and the Scribes
interrogated Him and they continued to find no fault with this man. They had no basis to have
Him executed by the authorities. For four days, they found no fault in Him. He was perfectly
sinless. Then, through an unofficial court, Jesus was found guilty and executed. And on the
fourteenth day of the month, when the Passover lamb was sacrificed, our Lord was sentenced to
death and died. This is how the Passover is fulfilled in the New Testament by Jesus Christ.
While Jesus was with His disciples in the upper room, He took the bread and the cup and said, “Do this in remembrance of Me”. Jesus made a point to His disciples and told them not to forget what He did. They probably had no idea what He was talking about at the time, but we have the ability to look back over the documents that were written and we can see why we should never, ever forget what He has done for us. The perfect lamb’s blood was shed, and without blood shedding there is no forgiveness of sin.

We have the bread and we have the body of Christ. We know what the bitter herbs are; no one wants to live under the yoke of slavery and no one wants to live under the yoke of sin. Sin is slavery. The wages of sin is death and Christ came to set us free from death. If you believe in Him, have faith in Him and accept him as Lord and Savior of your life, then He removes those sins. This is something that no animal could ever do.

Every year they sacrificed that lamb, but Christ was sacrificed once and for all. When He said it was finished, there was no longer any need of those sacrifices of the Old Testament. They were there as examples to point God’s people to what was coming. Once the real thing came, there was no longer any need for the animal sacrifices. From this point forward following the death of Jesus Christ, He said, “Do this” and “remember”. With the bread (His body) and the wine (His blood), He is the true Pascal lamb.

We celebrate communion with the Lord regularly in our chapel community. We partake of His body and blood, just like those remembering the Passover. They ate the lamb. They ate the bread. We, too, symbolically (or depending on your tradition, literally) eat His body and blood in the bread and the wine. We do this to remember the forgiveness of our sins. And where do we celebrate and remember our Lord’s saving grace? Right here in our home. This sanctuary is our home. We gather as a family. We are a family – a church family.

So the command from God, calling his people to respond in faith, to find a perfect lamb, in our home (sanctuary) with our church family, remembering his sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins is based on the Old Testament premise - a time long before Jesus came to earth in human form - pointing God’s people to the perfect sacrifice, the one who was to come, and pointing US to the perfect sacrifice - the one who is and will come again.

So when you receive the Lord’s Supper today, when you receive the bread and wine, realize that you are not only looking back and remembering, but you are also recognizing and celebrating that you are no longer under the bondage of sin. Thanks be to God!

PASTORAL PRAYER

God, just as You rescued the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt, setting them free to worship and serve You, so You have also rescued us, setting us free from slavery to sin and selfishness, and inviting us into relationship with You and one another. We praise You for the love and mercy You have shown toward us.

You call us to love and serve You by loving and serving our brothers and sisters, near and far; to put their needs and interests ahead of our own, and so to fulfill Your law of love, we offer our prayers for the world You created:

We pray for those who do not have what they need in order to survive; those without enough food and water, medical care, shelter, or security.

We pray for those who are living with serious illness or injury, who face each day with uncertainty or pain, who find themselves wondering what the future holds.

We pray for those who are grieving the loss of loved ones, and remember those and their families who have paid the ultimate price for our freedom.
Open our hearts to see the needs of those around us and in our world, and to respond with Your love.

We also pray for Your church, the Body of Christ on earth. We pray that we would be a living example of Your love in our world, treating one another with compassion and respect, settling differences with love and integrity, bound together by our common allegiance to You.

We are privileged to pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ, the perfect Lamb of God. Amen.