

Blood on the door (Exodus 12:1-14)

The lamb's blood isn't insurance against the wrath of God. It is a proclamation of fealty.

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Fifteen minutes into the art museum field trip, having encountered a monumental canvas painted entirely blue, my sixth-grade self decided art definitely wasn't for me. But we had an entire hour to explore, and by that time the elevators looked fun. So up my friends and I went, determined to see every foot of the museum as fast as possible, working from the top down.

We blitzed through exhibits of priceless indigenous textiles and Asian pottery and French Impressionist paintings. We cocked our eyebrows at pre-Warholian pop art and local examples of abstract expressionism, then made our way into a series of galleries that, I learned only much later, featured pieces from one of the largest and finest collections of Latin American art in the world.

That's where I encountered my first crucifix. If you want to introduce a Protestant kid to a crucifix, nearly life-sized ones from the Spanish colonial era are definitely the way to go. Painted wooden sculptures of an emaciated Jesus gazed wearily and lovingly down at us, but I didn't bother to notice his face. Christ's body gruesomely poured blood from his head, hands and feet, side, and—new one to me—his knees.

The imagery triggered feelings of fear and disgust in me. It would be decades before I could approach a crucifix with more reverence than dread.

Since then, I've learned that crucifixes aren't decorative; they bear the weight of theological messaging. In its in-your-face representation of Christ's suffering, the crucifix not only reinforces the shared (and harsh) reality of Christ's humanity but also of the human sinfulness that nailed him to the cross. Protestants, on the other hand, highly favor the empty cross and its representation of Christ triumphant.

Now, as a good Calvinist, I can certainly appreciate the cross as a symbol of a job well done. But what do we lose when we shed the cross of Jesus' body?

One Maundy Thursday, my congregation recreated the Exodus story up to the moment when the angel of the Lord passes over the homes marked with lamb's blood. We paused to imagine the terror of that awful night, the sounds of survivors' screams as they watched the flower of Egypt—its firstborn—perish in answer to 400 years of oppression. We paid particular attention to the blood smeared around the doorframes. One person observed that it seemed like a primitive and savage form of magic, warding off the avenging God.

But the lamb's blood isn't insurance against the wrath of God. It is a proclamation of fealty. Think of the team banners and political signs we moderns hang from our front porches, then multiply infinitely the risk and reward of such public allegiance to something other than Pharaoh. The mark of God's claim upon Israel had to be more than fabric and ink, which can be swapped out if the statement they make offends.

The mark of God's claim upon Israel is enfleshed, the very stuff of life, not unlike circumcision. The blood proclaims the stakes, and its message to the world is unequivocal: We belong to God—body and spirit—and our allegiance is to God alone.

Envision a cross, neither prissily cleaned up to celebrate Christ's triumph over death nor with his slumped body inspiring guilt and sorrow. Instead, imagine it empty of his body—and copiously stained with his blood. The vertical beam of Christ's cross epitomizes God's sovereignty over the merely human creature, just as those ancient doorposts did. The horizontal beam declares God's unwavering faithfulness to the human creature, just as those lintels did. Not marks of appeasement, but of identification. Not marks of shaming, but of claiming.

For years after that sixth-grade field trip, every time I visited that art museum I made a point to visit the Spanish colonial galleries. I can't tell you how much time I spent in front of those gory 18th and 19th century crucifixes, but it was enough to feel somewhat cheated even to this day by polished and pretty crosses sanitizing

the actual death that changed the human fate—not because of divine wrath appeased but because of divine right unequivocally asserted.