Exodus 12:1-14

Romans 13:8-14

Matthew 18:15-20

Today’s account of the Passover quite possibly provokes more questions about God than it answers. And it provokes uncomfortable questions. Did God really kill all the Egyptian first-born males, human and animal alike? Is this the God we worship here today? Like most questions of religion, this one does not have a simple yes or no answer. But we need an answer. This is pretty scary stuff, as the tenth and final plague brought upon the enemies of the Hebrews.

Pursuing this answer will take us beyond religious dogma or creed, hopefully to a place of understanding. But to get there, we have to go outside the religious sphere to literature, anthropology and history. But let’s start with a bit of science.

Were you one of those kids who asked mommy or daddy, “Where do babies come from?” Chances are good that you did not get a scientific lecture on how, at conception, the fusion of gametes produces a zygote which develops into embryonic form and grows after nine months into a baby.

What you may have heard is that a beautiful white stork brings new babies from heaven to mommies and daddies who want them. Or you may have been told that babies come from certain kinds of cabbage patches. You probably did not get the science story, and you were even less likely to hear the story of human sexual contact.

The stork and cabbage patch stories are examples of what literary scholars call the *marvelous*. We find it in works of science fiction and fantasy, like those by some of my favorite authors: Tolkien; C.S. Lewis; Philip K. Dick; Isaac Asimov (I could go on and on). In the marvelous, new laws of nature must be entertained to account for things not easily explained.[[1]](#footnote-1) New laws of nature like warp speed or time travel.

But we are those who have been conditioned by the scientific method and a very sophisticated worldview. We want facts, data and the truth. And big white storks simply do not deliver human babies from the clouds. It isn’t the truth. However, we may want to temper our dismissive urges or run the risk of becoming cynics. Cynics just don’t accept much of anything that’s true.

So while the marvelous doesn’t measure up to the scientific method, it has at least two things to commend it. The first is that it attempts to explain something that is real and true, like babies. The second is that it attempts to do so in a manner that preserves wonder and awe. And the truth is that when you consider the gametes and zygotes and embryos resulting in a fully developed life that is squeezed out of its mother’s body, it is almost less believable than the stork. The stork story preserves wonder and astonishment and gratitude for new life.

Biblical scholar Peter Miscall says that our first reading today is an “interesting test case for reading biblical narrative as a type of fantastic literature. The narrative is a fascinating mix of divine and human elements. The plagues and crossing of the sea are obviously miracles, yet the characters, especially Moses and the Israelites, are very human in their actions and responses. Great marvels of well-being or woe have little lasting effect on humans, but telling the story, the fantasy, of those marvels can cause joy and trust in God. Loss of the joy and wonder of fantasy leaves Israel – and us – with only the harsh realities of history.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Identity and response.

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This, in turn, reminds me of something profound that Simone Weil once noticed in the Genesis creation account: the greatness of God, Weil suggested, is not simply in God’s gigantic creative powers and prowess.  No, the deepest revelation of God’s greatness in the creating of the universe is that God is not God-centered.  God is other-oriented, other-centric.  God’s greatness is that he is able to get outside of God’s own self—and being God, the self in question is more than sufficient for many eternities’ worth of self-absorption—and take note of and revel in the existence of the Other.  Even for God, his own creatures made in his image are the most important thing.  When it comes to our love for neighbors, God is asking us to do no more than what he himself has been doing since the dawn of creation.

* **Romans 13:8-14**

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[The Center for Excellence in Preaching](http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/thisWeek/index.php),

1. Peter D. Miscall, “Biblical Narrative and Categories of the Fantastic,”(Semeia, volume 60), 1992, p 39-51, http://www.sbl-site.org/  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)