Today I may be telling you things you already know. But if so, you will be among the first people in my experience for which this is true. And yet, I think what we are going to talk about is really fun and fascinating. I hope you end up thinking so too. One of the less obvious joys of Bible study is seeing the endless interconnections between different passages and themes that emerge from time to time. Is that humans reenacting what they have come to expect? Or is that God bringing important themes back to life in a series of new dimensions? Maybe it is both. But I will leave such conclusions to you.

To get started, I want to talk a bit about three scriptural passages. I will talk about them separately at first. As I do, perhaps you will begin to see connections between them even before I get to that part. Because we are taking only one session to deal with all of this, I will cheat a little bit. That is, I will bring in more context than usual, and explain it my way. So you may need to track it on your own after we finish this class, just to make sure I didn’t get it wrong or mislead you.

My focus will be the Exodus passage about Passover and the Acts passage about Pentecost. But I want to begin by talking about a passage in Genesis: the near-miss sacrifice of Isaac.

> After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here am I.” He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.” So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him.

> On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.” And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, “My father!” And he said,
“Here am I, my son.” He said, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham said, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So they went both of them together.

When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here am I.” He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place, “The LORD will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.” (Genesis 22:1-14)

We are going to skip quickly through this passage, though it is one of the most profound in the entire Old Testament. I will suggest that, for the moment at least, you accept vast conclusions that took me years to come to.

The year is approximately 2000 B.C. It takes Abraham two full days to make the journey, and part of a third day to get to the sacred place appointed. So, “On the third day, [Isaac shall rise again].” I am not the first, more like the last, to notice the parallels between the story of Isaac’s sacrifice and the story of Jesus’ sacrifice. Two loving fathers: Abraham and God. Two innocent sons: Isaac and Jesus. One son escapes death on God’s altar; the other does not escape death on man’s Cross. And please remember: It is not God’s Cross! If you miss that, you miss everything. The Cross is all man’s idea, and humans are controlling it. In Christian imagery, the Cross is now frequently said to be synonymous with a sacrifice on God’s altar. In many places, we are trying to say that the Cross was God’s idea: We are innocent, and God is the bloodthirsty one who needs the death of Jesus to satisfy some code of justice – which, by the way, is never really explained or understood. God is the all-powerful Creator, until suddenly he is compelled to kill Jesus in order to prevent himself from killing us. God cannot help himself; he is at the mercy of the rules and demands of some concept of justice that is greater and more powerful than God. Are you following this? It is being taught and proclaimed all over Christendom to this day.
Plus this: We were all doomed until Jesus stepped in to appease the wrath of God by offering Himself as a sacrifice in our place. God had no chance to forgive us – no possibility of forgiving us – and no choice but to kill us, until this redeeming price was paid. If this is what you think and believe about the love, mercy, forgiveness, and power of God, I suspect you might not be very happy for very long in The New Church. Which is not to say you are not welcome.

In any case, the problem is not God’s ability or willingness to forgive. The problem is our denial. We don’t want to admit that we are the ones who killed Jesus. As long as we can blame it on God, that allows us to keep sidestepping the true impact of Jesus’ life and purpose among us. It is the means by which so many of us can still avoid true repentance, and conversion. Isaac was perfectly safe on God’s altar on Mount Moriah. Jesus was dramatically unsafe at the hands of humans on that Cross. So who is dangerous, God or man? Deeper than that, if God spared Isaac and forbade human sacrifice, how is it that most of Christian theology is still claiming that Jesus had to die because it was God’s will – not our sin or rebellion or disobedience or animosity? If we insist on telling the story that way, then God was willing to spare Abraham’s son but was unwilling to spare his own son. Does that make any kind of sense to you? Are you willing to believe this just because some preacher says you are supposed to, and that you will go to Hell if you don’t?

Back to Abraham and Isaac: It is apparently a wilderness area. Had no one yet discovered the Gihon Spring? Or is there a village below the spring and then Abraham goes on to higher ground, leaving the servants and the donkey at the village? Why not take the donkey farther? (In seminary, we used to translate that verse: “You stay here with the ass; I’m going on ahead.”) Regardless, Isaac has to carry the wood from there on. And once there, Abraham builds an altar.

How does Abraham perceive the command – the guidance – to do all this? Do you think prayer was better, easier, and clearer in Abraham’s day than it is in yours? It is a familiar cop-out. “Oh, they had it easy in the olden days. Everything was clear and simple back then.” It is one of our many ways of trying to make the Bible useless and irrelevant to us. In full context, God is using this incident to test Abraham. Be careful. The “test” can imply a difficult task – an experience – that will bring Abraham to a new understanding of God, of truth, of life. Abraham had come out of Ur, and from an ancient Babylonian religion where child sacrifice was assumed and required to appease the gods (Ziggurat).
Isaac was the firstborn (at least to Sarah), and Abraham must have dreaded for years the notion and conviction that Isaac would be required by God – as a gift, a sacrifice. That was how Abraham was raised. That was what he was taught. Finally he could put it off no longer.

But God will use this experience – this encounter – to banish child sacrifice forever from the beliefs and ways of Judaism. The firstborn still belong to God, but henceforth (and down to this very day) they will be redeemed by another gift – a special sacrifice. In short, from this day forward, Judaism will acknowledge that the firstborn belong to God, but will also proclaim that God does not want the children sacrificed. The children must be dedicated and redeemed by a substitute sacrifice. They must never themselves be sacrificed (killed) on God’s altar. (Have I confused anybody yet?)

Before we move on, is it clear to everyone that this Mount Moriah is now considered to be one of the holiest places on earth? (At least in Western culture.) Mount Sinai is very holy. Mount Moriah is even more so. The Jewish temple(s) were built on this site, and it was chosen because of the incident with Isaac. The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem today was built on the rock believed to be the site where Abraham built the altar for the sacrifice of Isaac. Prior to Islam, the altar of the Jewish temple had been on this same rock, until the temple was destroyed in 70 A.D. The “wailing wall” in Jerusalem today is part of the holiness of this site; it is the closest the Jewish people can come to the place of their temple – and to this sacred rock.

Now take a deep breath, and let us go to our second passage, which is from Exodus. I include here the full passage, but will focus only on the underlined portions.

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, “This month shall be for you the beginning of months. It shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month every man shall take a lamb according to their fathers’ houses, a lamb for a household. And if the household is too small for a lamb, then he and his nearest neighbor shall take according to the number of persons; according to what each can eat you shall make your count for the lamb. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male a year old. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats, and you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs at twilight.
“Then they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat the flesh that night, roasted on the fire; with unleavened bread and bitter herbs they shall eat it. Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted, its head with its legs and its inner parts. And you shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. In this manner you shall eat it: with your belt fastened, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. And you shall eat it in haste. It is the LORD’s Passover. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. The blood shall be a sign for you, on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt.

“This day shall be for you a memorial day, and you shall keep it as a feast to the LORD; throughout your generations, as a statute forever, you shall keep it as a feast. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall remove leaven out of your houses, for if anyone eats what is leavened, from the first day until the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel. On the first day you shall hold a holy assembly, and on the seventh day a holy assembly. No work shall be done on those days. But what everyone needs to eat, that alone may be prepared by you. And you shall observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread, for on this very day I brought your hosts out of the land of Egypt. Therefore you shall observe this day, throughout your generations, as a statute forever. In the first month, from the fourteenth day of the month at evening, you shall eat unleavened bread until the twenty-first day of the month at evening. For seven days no leaven is to be found in your houses. If anyone eats what is leavened, that person will be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether he is a sojourner or a native of the land. You shall eat nothing leavened; in all your dwelling places you shall eat unleavened bread.”

Then Moses called all the elders of Israel and said to them, “Go and select lambs for yourselves according to your clans, and kill the Passover lamb. Take a bunch of hyssop and dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and touch the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood that is in the basin. None of you shall go out of the door of his house until the morning. For the LORD will pass through to strike the Egyptians, and when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the LORD will pass over the door and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you.
PASSOVER AND PENTECOST (AND MOUNT MORIAH)

You shall observe this rite as a statute for you and for your sons forever. And when you come to the land that the LORD will give you, as he has promised, you shall keep this service. And when your children say to you, ‘What do you mean by this service?’ you shall say, ‘It is the sacrifice of the LORD’s Passover, for he passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt, when he struck the Egyptians but spared our houses.’”

And the people bowed their heads and worshiped. Then the people of Israel went and did so; as the LORD had commanded Moses and Aaron, so they did.

At midnight the LORD struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock. And Pharaoh rose up in the night, he and all his servants and all the Egyptians. And there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was not a house where someone was not dead. Then he summoned Moses and Aaron by night and said, “Up, go out from among my people, both you and the people of Israel; and go, serve the LORD, as you have said. Take your flocks and your herds, as you have said, and be gone, and bless me also!”

The Egyptians were urgent with the people to send them out of the land in haste. For they said, “We shall all be dead.” So the people took their dough before it was leavened, their kneading bowls being bound up in their cloaks on their shoulders. The people of Israel had also done as Moses told them, for they had asked the Egyptians for silver and gold jewelry and for clothing. And the LORD had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked. Thus they plundered the Egyptians.

And the people of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children. A mixed multitude also went up with them, and very much livestock, both flocks and herds. And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had brought out of Egypt, for it was not leavened, because they were thrust out of Egypt and could not wait, nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves.

The time that the people of Israel lived in Egypt was 430 years. At the end of 430 years, on that very day, all the hosts of the LORD went out from the land of Egypt. It was a night of watching by the LORD, to bring them out of the land of Egypt; so this same night is a night of watching kept to the LORD by all the people of Israel throughout their generations.
And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, “This is the statute of the Passover: no foreigner shall eat of it, but every slave that is bought for money may eat of it after you have circumcised him. No foreigner or hired servant may eat of it. It shall be eaten in one house; you shall not take any of the flesh outside the house, and you shall not break any of its bones. All the congregation of Israel shall keep it. If a stranger shall sojourn with you and would keep the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised. Then he may come near and keep it; he shall be as a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person shall eat of it. There shall be one law for the native and for the stranger who sojourns among you.” All the people of Israel did just as the LORD commanded Moses and Aaron. And on that very day the LORD brought the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt by their hosts.

The LORD said to Moses, “Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine.” (Exodus 12:1-13:1)

We have again much too big a story to deal with unless we already know it. But you recognize the culmination of the plagues of Egypt, and what finally gained the release of the Jewish slaves. Even after all of that, Pharaoh’s armies pursued them to the sea (of reeds). Pharaoh is the quintessential bad guy. Others are worse because they should have known better (like Ahab or Solomon), but Pharaoh doesn’t believe in God, completely ignores God, and has usurped for himself all the rights and privileges of God. Pharaoh thinks it’s fine for him to enslave the Hebrew people simply because he has the power to do so. When told that they belong to God and that he has no legitimate rights over them, it makes no real impression on him. Pharaoh assumes that he himself is the only God that matters. It is not an unheard of attitude – to this day.

As a result of Pharaoh living completely outside the authority of God, all creation starts to come apart at the seams. That is the meaning of the plagues. With a non-God in the place of God, all Creation – all natural law and order – begins to break down. (This is once again the concern of all “religious” ecologists.) The plagues are supposed to wake Pharaoh up, but he is so focused on his own mock authority that he cannot see or learn or understand. (God hardened Pharaoh’s heart. A little early Calvinism thrown in here.) So even though the world is falling apart beneath him, Pharaoh continues on his doomed course. Aren’t we glad we never have issues like that? In any case, I sometimes suggest, but probably not clearly enough, that when we read Scripture, we are often
not hearing what God is saying, but instead what humans are assuming God must be saying. It must be God’s opinion or God’s will simply because of what’s happening. If it weren’t God’s will, it couldn’t be happening, right? There is no free will; it’s all just a very big puppet show. Maybe so. But you don’t believe that any more than I do. If you did, you wouldn’t be trying to figure anything out. You wouldn’t be seeking guidance. You would never pray. There would be no choices, no meaning, no purpose. Puppets don’t have minds of their own. And they cannot possibly taste of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Back to reality, however much harder and more challenging: We really need the story of Mount Moriah to understand the Passover. The firstborn belong to God. The whole world knows this. All the ancient religions knew and honored this. But Pharaoh’s ultimate disrespect for God is seen in his blatant disregard for God’s rights over the firstborn. Pharaoh neither sacrifices nor redeems the firstborn of Egypt. (Human or animal. Did you notice?)

In the Exodus story, God finally says, “If you won’t give me what is rightfully mine, I will take it by force.” So what is the reason for the blood on the doorposts and lintels of the houses? All the faithful people have sacrificed a lamb or a goat to redeem their firstborn. They have put the blood of this sacrifice on their doorways as the proof or sign of their redemptive sacrifices. Therefore, the “angel of death” is allowed to “pass over” their homes. They have acknowledged God’s rights over their firstborn – God’s special ownership. And they have made a redemptive sacrifice – paid the required price for them. Therefore, if there is no blood on the doorpost and lintel, it is a blatant assertion that either God does not exist or God has no rights over the firstborn. Except in this instance, God argues the point. God takes all these firstborn unto himself. They don’t just die; they go to where they really belong. Many have said to me, “How can God be so cruel and unfeeling – enough to kill all these babies?” How can God be cruel enough to take his children unto himself? Some of us long for the day! God thinks his rights and his ownership are even primary to our own. Isn’t that one of our greatest grievances against God? In the story of the exodus, God is even cruel enough to save his Creation from falling apart when human rulers will not acknowledge his authority. I have no problem with this kind of “cruelty.” I just wish we could depend on God to act this way more frequently. Why is God so slow to right the wrongs, and so patient about getting everything back on track?
But what is the even larger drama going on (not that what we have mentioned so far lacks drama)? What is the real point of the exodus? Why is God freeing the Jewish slaves? Why the manna, the pillar of cloud by day, and the pillar of fire by night? The real purpose and point to all of this is to bring the people to the Holy Mountain where they may receive (and ratify) the Covenant. God’s only answer to Sin is Covenant. Sin is separation and alienation. Covenant is putting us back together again: relationship – responsible relationship – with promise and trust and purpose. Covenant brings us back together into a faithful community in the presence of God. Sin is everything falling apart. Covenant is everything coming back together. God wants the Chosen People back – on course again, being God’s exemplary witnesses to the kind of LIFE God wants for all Creation. Never mind, for the moment, whether you believe it. This is what the Old Testament (the Book of the First Covenant) is about. God is bringing the Chosen – the Children of Israel (Jacob) – to the Holy Mountain so that they may receive the Torah – the teachings and statements about what God’s will and purpose are. (The true Way of Life: under Torah.) And there they will bind themselves to this Covenant, and promise to live together henceforth in this way and manner – by these precepts – forever and always.

It is interesting, at least to me, that so many people still think the climax of the story is the Passover, or the crossing of the Red (Reed) Sea, or the call of Moses (the burning bush). Few seem to realize that none of this would be worth doing – worth knowing, worth telling, worth remembering – if it were not for the real culmination: the Covenant with God – the giving of Torah (the Law).

So, to go from the sublime to the picayune: What is the timing? The Feast (Festival) of Weeks. The end of the grain harvest. (May/June – Sivan.) Some argue, and doubtless correctly, that harvest time is harvest time, and that if we go back far enough, harvest time had no particular spiritual meaning beyond noticing God’s providence. But clearly, somewhere along the line, the Feast of Weeks – fifty days after the Passover – came to be associated with a feast in commemoration of the gift of the Law. The Zohar reinterprets the fifty days of the harvest season as the courting days of the bridegroom Israel with the bride: Torah.

In the Book of Jubilees, an angel of the presence explains that Israel is to celebrate the holiday in the third month every year to renew the Covenant. It is a law so important that it is inscribed on the heavenly tablets. (Jubilees 6:17-18) It also specifically draws a connection between
the time of the holiday and the date of the Covenant on Mount Sinai. (Exodus 19:1) They entered the wilderness of Sinai on the first day of the third month. Moses was ordered to ascend the mountain to obtain the two stones on the sixteenth day of the third month – the date of the Festival of Weeks. (Jubilees 1:1) This means that the Covenant of the Book of Exodus (chapters 19-24) was made on March 15, the Festival date. Clearly, the Festival of Weeks became associated with the giving of Torah on Mount Sinai – and this is the Old Testament Pentecost (fifty days after Passover). You didn’t need all that detail ... unless, of course, someone wants to challenge the association between Pentecost and the giving of the Law – the establishment of the Covenant. If you missed it: Old Testament Pentecost celebrates the giving of the Law (Torah). This is the heart and core of the First Covenant – the First Testament.

One more deep breath, and let us go to our third and final passage, from the Book of Acts.

*The day of Pentecost had come* [not Christian Pentecost; Jewish Pentecost – the Christian Pentecost has not yet happened or been established] and they were all together in one place. Suddenly there came from the sky what sounded like a strong, driving wind [ruach = wind/spirit], a noise which filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them flames like tongues of fire distributed among them and coming to rest on each one. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to talk in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them power of utterance.

Now there were staying in Jerusalem devout Jews drawn from every nation under heaven. At this sound, a crowd of them gathered, and they were bewildered because each one heard his own language spoken; they were amazed and in astonishment exclaimed, “Surely these people who are speaking are all Galileans! How is it that each of us can hear them in his own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites; inhabitants of Mesopotamia, of Judea and Cappadocia, of Pontus and Asia, of Phrygia and Pamphylia, of Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene: visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes; Cretans and Arabs – all of us hear them telling in our own tongues the great things God has done.” They were all amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What can this mean?” (Acts 2:1-13, REB)
Not to sidetrack us, but this is not at all what is usually meant by “speaking in tongues.” In the usual experience of speaking in tongues, nobody understands what is being said, unless there is an interpreter (which is unusual, and the interpretation is nonconfirmable). In this story, the opposite is the case. People are “hearing” deeply and completely, as if each person present is hearing what the disciples are saying as if it were being spoken in their native language. In other words, they are all “getting it” completely.

Back to our point: The very early Christians have gathered on the Jewish Pentecost (the Feast of Weeks). They are Jews themselves, celebrating the Jewish Pentecost, not yet our Christian Pentecost. And they find themselves being lifted beyond their usual celebration to one of those incredibly eerie, many-dimensional experiences.

Fifty days after Passover – after the blood of the lambs and the deaths of the firstborn – we get Jewish Pentecost: the giving of the Old Covenant.

Fifty days after Easter – after the blood of a very different lamb (we would say THE Lamb) and the death of another firstborn – we get what? Does the angel of death pass over us? No, but it doesn’t matter because death does not stick anymore. And this Lamb does reverse some things, because He rose again. Behind the context and the parallels is Jesus’ comment on Maundy Thursday: “This is the New Covenant in my blood.” So we get a second, new-dimensional Pentecost: The coming of – the giving and receiving of – the Holy Spirit. And this is the heart and core – the very enactment – of the New Covenant.

Passover without the giving of the Law is a complete and total dud. Easter without the coming of the Holy Spirit is also a complete and total dud – a fizz-out; a lot of noise and fuss and bother without any real point to it. What good is the parting of the Red Sea if nobody goes to Mount Sinai to receive the Covenant? Jesus is not the one who needs to know about the Resurrection. He already knows! WE are the ones who need to know. So how does it translate to us – how do we get picked up and brought into the story? It seems to me that endless Christians, endless church structures, and endless creeds and theologies don’t really know this.
The purpose and meaning of the whole huge drama of Passover and the freeing of the Jewish slaves in Egypt was Pentecost: the giving of the Law – the Covenant between God and Israel.

Yes! And the purpose and meaning of the whole huge drama of Good Friday and Easter – the freeing of all of us slaves, who have been in bondage to Sin, Death, and the Devil, and to guilt, fear, and loneliness – that purpose was also Pentecost, yet Pentecost on a new level and in a new key: the giving of the Holy Spirit – the New Covenant – the New Relationship. “This is the New Covenant in my blood.”

Maybe that is all bland and blasé to some of you. It makes the hair on the back of my neck – both physical and spiritual – stand straight up. And that doesn’t begin to tell it all or comprehend it all. But at least I get that much, and see some of the connections. Now all we get to do is live it: the New Covenant – life and relationship with the Holy Spirit of our Risen Lord.