He was a sassy creature. The seed Sue had put out for the little birds he gobbled down in his greed. A large mountain squirrel was he. Tufts of fur rising from his head like devil’s horns. Bold fearless. I spent the day chasing him away. Showering him with water, clapping my hands — throwing sticks at him. But always he returned to steal what was intended from the little ones. And to defy me. If only I could show him — plant real fear in his heart....

Little ones. The children of Israel — slaves in Egypt were God’s little ones. The people God had chosen for God’s own out of all the peoples on the earth. And as they were abused by the more powerful Egyptians the Lord grew angry. Instead of honor and respect they were treated with contempt. Whips, chains, backbreaking labor were their daily companions. And so the Lord said, “The Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out from among them.” Yes, the Lord would show them — plant fear in their hearts.

The Lord said, I will pass through the land of Egypt and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord.

One morning I had had enough with that squirrel. I went down into the basement of the cabin looking for the bb gun that I had seen years ago. I found it — tipped it to hear the bb’s rolling inside and headed for the porch. Quietly I sneaked out the side door of the cabin — crept along the deck out of sight of that squirrel. Slowly I moved the barrel of the gun around the corner — moved my head just enough around that corner to see the squirrel up to his usual shenanigans. Carefully I took aim at his rear hip — squeezed the trigger. He dropped like a rock from the feeder to the deck. Then slowly on three legs he dragged himself to safety.

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 prisoner who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock.
Pharaoh arose in the night, he and all his officials and all the Egyptians; and there was a loud cry in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead.

A limping squirrel.

Firstborn dead.

Passover in Jerusalem.

Jesus and his disciples were not the only ones at table that night. All through the town Jews were gathered while the hated Romans occupied their streets. “Lord, grant another night of slaughter – free your people once more Lord. Make them know that you are the Lord – the one true God. Let the streets run with the blood of these Romans, Lord. Now – tonight.

But Jesus took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and said, This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.

Not a lamb for the feast, nor the firstborn of Pharaoh, nor Roman soldiers but the firstborn of God would die. God’s Son, Jesus.

Maybe my story of the squirrel is too simple and silly to be compared with what God was doing but that is how I am thinking about God and Jesus tonight. God had tried violence – starting with the flood – slaughtering the firstborn on the passover night, drowning the soldiers and horses of Pharaoh’s army in the Red Sea, decimating whole populations as the children of Israel conquered the Promised Land. Then in the time of the judges pouring out death on the enemies of God’s people – Gideon, Deborah, Samson. King Saul, King David leading Israel’s army in the defeat of the nations. And finally that most painful slaughter – punishing the chosen people for their unfaithfulness by sending the Babylonian army to destroy Jerusalem. And through it all the repeated cry, “Now they will know that I am the Lord.

But they never did.
And so on this Passover night God was doing a new thing. All the judgement, all the sin, all the violence would be heaped on God's own Son. God's firstborn, Jesus.

When Jesus says, Love one another as I have loved you, he is not talking about washing some feet once in a while. He is talking about a love that does not let go of you, even if it means death.

I can learn to live with the irritations of a squirrel stealing birdseed, but loving people who don't make good choices is much harder. You all know what it is like to love someone and to see them going down roads that do not lead to life. You try to help, you give advice, you punish if it is a child, you do everything you can do and nothing helps. There is nothing you can do but love. This love is a kind of dying for it is giving up on what you dream for another and accepting what is. Even learning to embrace what is - loving the person that is and not the one that could be or should be or might be.

Jesus loves you like that. He wants us to love one another like that.

In the very next moment after Jesus makes this command of love he tells Peter - Before the cock crows you will deny me three times. Jesus loves the Peter who is - not the Peter who should be, or could be or might be.

Will you be like Jesus? Will I? I don't know? But I am sure that the one who loves you more than he loved life itself hopes you will.

And what of my squirrel. It might have been he who was back the next day feeding once more. My violence did not change him. But it did change me.