

Burnt offerings, not required
Sermon Delivered – Palisades Presbyterian Church
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Lectionary Readings: Genesis 22:1-14; Matthew 10:40-42

With thoughts on the General Assembly...

The headline might have read: "Father prepared to sacrifice son."

This is a hard text. It reflects a time a bit worse than our own. Quite a bit worse.

It was bad enough that animals were sacrificed in religious rites and still are in some places; but it was an ancient time with a fairly distributed practice of human sacrifices to assuage the deities.

Fortunately, we can historically distance ourselves from other gods and religious practices to satisfy those gods, but when it comes to God the Almighty, the One God, the God that we worship, the God we are told spoke to Abraham – it becomes a very difficult passage to accept as a reflection of the loving God we have come to know in our lives.

It's a story from Genesis, written long after it occurred. It's a story that is referred to in all three faiths that stemmed from Abraham: Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Each has its own and multiple interpretations – from Abraham being tested by God, to some suggesting his imagination got the better of him, thinking he was called to such an horrific thing.

Some excuse Abraham's actions, believing he knew that Isaac would be fine, since God had already promised him that Isaac, the sacrifice, would be the father of many. Since that had yet to happen, Abraham had nothing to worry about. One way or another, Isaac would be saved, revived, or resurrected.

Others say this is a more symbolic passage, using the father of the faith to put an end to human sacrifice, with the imprimatur of God. They say it was a condemnation of such barbarism.

And, some interpretations see this story as foreshadowing a time when God would sacrifice God's only son Jesus, to make amends for the sins of the world – still not such an easy notion to grasp.

Other details...according to all three traditions of faith, Isaac was an adult at the time of the story – certainly able to resist, had he chosen to. Islam, actually, believes it was not Isaac who was the sacrifice – but Ishmael.

And what of Sarah? I had friends in seminary who suggested that it was Sarah who had followed a strangely behaving Abraham around, and that she was the one who actually called out to him, snapped him out of his trance that prevented Isaac from being killed.

If I had to guess, because that is all it would be, I would side with the symbolic aspect of the writings – this being one of those early instructional stories about how to behave or not, teaching the emerging nation as it went along. Or, I could side with a story about a declining centenarian-at-least Abraham, acting strangely in his well-advanced age, nearly committing a terrible tragedy, written into the Torah in ways that took a real and embarrassing event, giving it broad and formative meaning.

I don't know, really.

However, I simply cannot accept this being a directive from God that orders the sacrifice of human life. Certain theologians hold fast to the idea that if God chooses, God can take life. I can accept that; unsure if God participates in our world in that particular way, but I can accept that.

However, I cannot accept that God uses others as surrogates to commit murder to please or calm God – or for any other purpose.

Were that so, this world would be even more of a strange place than it already is.

You may disagree, and I respect that. It is just that I have taken so long in moving from a vindictive, punishing, unpredictable God, brandishing guilt and long-suffering - referred to over and over again in the Old Testament, that my exegetical exercises, more often than not, lead me to the broader hermeneutics, the side of the narratives with strong instructional guides imbedded in their scripts.

Still, much is conjecture, inspired by the work and study of Scriptures. I could find no definitive information that suggests that child sacrifice in the Hebrew tradition ended following this story – nor can I find any indication that it continued – other than some suggesting Jesus was the next and ultimate sacrifice of God for humanity:

A way of showing such love that God sacrificed God's only son to heal the world.

However, I think that is much different. God who inspires one with Godself in such a way that they are willing to follow the path of faithfulness and love – right into the arms and dangers of their oppressors – that is a love story between God and God's Son – one from which we all can learn.

It is always interesting to consider our readings from the lectionary against the backdrop of current events. This week at the 218th General Assembly there was an opening for the Spirit to “get windy” and, indeed, it did. Over the period of ten days or so, the committees and plenary sessions voted to delete G-6.0106b from the Book of Order; to delete previous AI’s that referred to homosexual behavior as sin; initiated the process to revise the Heidelberg Catechism and its references to homosexuality; and it overturned the ruling of the GAPJC which set G-6.0106 apart as an essential tenet that could not be scrupled.

A windy and great Spirit – refreshing old and “not so ancient” practices in light of a loving and inclusive, radically so – God.

I’ve ordered summaries of the actions of this GA for the congregation and will have them available in the next few weeks. In the meantime, visit pcusa.org for all the details.

In terms of deciding to actively seek changes from where we were just a short time ago these are as major initiatives—even prophetic. It was here in our Session at Palisades Presbyterian Church that the first of the Delete B overtures originated for this General Assembly.

And rightly, we share joy with others for the chance to create a more just, inclusive, and loving church, acknowledging that these proposals have at the same time, created terror for others who believe these changes will mark the end of their beloved church.

There is no victory here, for that would suggest we have no choice but to be divided. It may be that we are at the moment, but I cannot accept that will always be the case.

More than changing the constitution or even creating a more just church, these decisions allow us to now enter into a space of conversation, prayer, and being with one another – required, as a result of the GA’s actions. We have been given an opportunity, within a timeline, for all of us step back and observe the “see-saw.” It’s the same one we have spoken of before, the one that has kept us on opposite sides in the forever rising and falling of the church around the lives of people affected by the choices we have and will make. We have the chance to set the pivot aside and then step forward and embrace, yes, embrace one another as sisters and brothers in baptism, created by the same God, called by the same God, to be one – with our differences. We have been given the chance to end the sacrifice of one group or another to satisfy a God some believe demands such things. We have a chance to be of faith: vulnerable, present, honest, compassionate, accepting, and humble.

This is the time to step out and into the light and God’s will for this church.

There is probably no group that can help in healing others more than those who have survived being the object of such oppression. To survive the oppression and to have the courage and desire to use such wounds in healing and loving others is the most powerful demonstration of the Spirit. It is the most powerful demonstration of the inherent wrongs of such oppression, sometimes first seen when the oppressor loves the other. This is the foundational love, the only force in my opinion that will end this struggle once and for all.

I believe it is time for us to step aside and agree to vote out these amendments together – not out of agreement or disagreement, but out of love, so that we may return to ministering in a broken world that has such incredible needs.

Therein, I think, is the difference between the stories of the Old Testament, the Torah, and Q'uran about Abraham – and the new commands of God through Jesus in the New of Second Testament. No longer are we to sacrifice one or many of our own to satisfy a testing and testy God. Rather we are to love one another as God loves us. From there, we will be able to get along just fine.

The sheer welcome of this morning's reading of Matthew underscores that even the smallest acts of hospitality in the Name of Jesus, welcomes one in the name of God. The welcoming acts of our lives, our Christian lives, are direct extensions of the presence of God in our world reaching out and through us to one another, saying, "Come. You are welcome. You are neither above nor below us – but with us as, in the name of the one who calls us all."

Wouldn't it be something if we were able to frame our mission in such a way that we voted, instead, on love? Do you think it could be a unanimous vote? Wouldn't **that** be something?

The quote on the front of this morning's bulletin is from The Secret Message of Jesus by Brain D. McLaren.

"...if Jesus does his job successfully, if Jesus effectively proclaims and introduces people into the kin[g]dom of God, he bequeaths to his successors not the same situation he inherited but rather a radically new situation—with new problems, new questions, new opportunities, and new requirements."

It seems to me that this is where we are. This can no longer be a teeter-totter time of one side over the other, but instead an agreement to clear the obstacles to unity in a way that really brings us new problems, opportunities, and requirements – for the world and our hearts are in need of such healing. And, I think that is the gift of this GA – the chance to heal and love one another, as God loves us. Let us ratify that by whatever we might do.

Let this be so as we move forward. Let us give thanks for all our sisters and brothers, and, thanks, especially to you your faithfulness, courage, and love for all whom God has created and called.

Amen.