

Alan Baughcum

Sermon: The Lord Will Provide
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St. Michael's UCC, Baltimore, Ohio
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Genesis 22:1-14, Romans 6:12-23

Well, here is the problem for your pastor. It's summer and nobody wants to hear anything but happiness and light in our weekly sermons. I get it!

So, if this sermon gets too heavy for you, here are three things to try to lighten things up:

- Using church bulletins to design and test a collection of paper airplanes.
- Start from the back of the church and try to crawl all the way to the front, under the pews, without being noticed.
- Pass a note to our organist, Terri, asking whether she plays requests.

Part of the problem is that we are a church committed to sticking to the Lectionary. For those who do not know, that is a set of readings from the Bible spread over three years that provides a wide exposure to the Scriptures, albeit not 100% complete. It offers the advantage that people to go to widely different churches are exposed to the same Scriptures on any given Sunday. So, we and our neighbors can compare notes on what our churches' ministers did with the same text when last we gathered in our sanctuaries to worship.

And this week and last week our lectionary readings from the Bible deal with exceedingly serious stuff ... scriptures that deal with expulsion from the family, poverty and deprivation and this week, the sacrifice of children in religious rituals. Give me a break!

Last week I talked about the need to trust God, even when faced with really hard times. Hagar had to do that when she and her son, Ishmael, found themselves alone in the wilderness, having been thrown out by Abraham, at Sarah's instigation and with God's permission.

This week's Scriptures tell us that Abraham, having had to say farewell to his first son, now finds himself commanded by God to travel three days northward to sacrifice his only remaining son ... on the very mountain that will, nearly a thousand years later, be the site of God's Temple in Jerusalem.

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Isn't there a sermon somewhere in the Scriptures about sitting in the sun on the beaches and enjoying the beauty of God's creation?

The Old Testament has always been difficult for Christians. The first compilation of the Christian Bible was by someone named Marcion. He lived in the second century. His version of the Bible essentially took out anything from the Old Testament because he thought the God, we read about there is too grim and too bloody. His Bible consisted of the Gospel according to Luke and ten of the epistles attributed to the apostle Paul. Thomas Jefferson did something similar 2000 years later and ended up with a very messy cut-and-paste Bible with most of the OT absent.

Many people have problems with the Old Testament. First, it tells a story about Creation in seven days ... no big bang, no theory of evolution. And so much of the Old Testament consists of violent stories about how God seeks the deaths of people who are not part of the chosen descendants of Abraham or who are actively antagonistic towards those folks.

It is very hard for many of us to hear much of this OT narrative. In particular, in seminary and in the years since, I have found a lot of people who find the OT story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac very disturbing. There are many who claim that his story is an example of Scriptures that have been the justification or rationalization for a lot of child and spousal abuse by people conditioned by such Scriptures to see children (and women) as objects to be used, rather than as human beings to be loved.

In a similar way I have encountered people who have fallen away from traditional Christian faith because they see the story of Jesus going to the cross in the same way. Surely, they say, there must be something wrong with a religion and a faith and a God that seems to lift up human sacrifices.

I share the revulsion that all of us feel at the notion of sacrificing human beings, especially the notion of child sacrifice and especially as ways of honoring or placating some god.

And yet historically children have been sacrificed in exactly that way. In Abraham's time and earlier the Punic peoples, the Carthaginians and the Phoenicians, practiced child sacrifice. Even after Abraham there were sects among the Canaanite peoples, perhaps even among Jewish followers of Yahweh, who sacrificed children by fire.

The god Molech, or Moloch, was the god of the Canaanite underworld. The Old Testament sacrifices to Molech took place in the incinerator in the valley of Hinnom, just outside Jerusalem. The Aramaic word for Hinnom is Gehenna. That may well be why Gehenna later became a term for hell.

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Allusions to Molech in the OT suggest that the high point of worship of Molech in Judah happened in the 8th-6th centuries before Christ. This was a period of considerable political distress. Judahite Kings Ahaz and Manesseh (2 Kings 16:3, 21:6) are said to have offered up their sons in sacrifice. The cult was said to have been abolished by King Josiah (2 Kings 23:10) in his reform of 621 B.C. but may have revived briefly later (Isaiah 57:5, 9).

So, it is possible to see the story of Abraham and Isaac as a story in which God intends to demonstrate to the Jewish people (and to others in that region) that child sacrifice is not something that God wants. God honors Abraham's trust in God by in fact finding a ram for the sacrifice, just as Abraham said when questioned by Isaac. "The Lord will provide."

In a similar way it is possible to see the story of Jesus as God's telling followers of God that God does not want any more sacrifices or burnt offerings. Jesus is the final sacrifice, the ultimate sacrifice, that ends the need for any more sacrificial offerings of God's creatures to God. The Lord has provided.

Even so, many people find the story of Jesus going to the cross a truly awful story about how God approved of human sacrifice in the form of His only Son. I do not see the story that way ... rather I am grateful for Jesus' willingness to go the cross and thereby end the need for any more sacrifices. I was thinking about that when I wrote a short poem on the subject in seminary. It's entitled "Good Friday," the day of Jesus' crucifixion. Its first line is a quote from Isaiah 53:10:

GOOD FRIDAY

Isaiah 53:10

"It was the will of the LORD
to crush him with pain."

How shall we worship one
who wills
pain?

How shall we praise one
who decides
to crush one of his creatures?

When the One who wills pain
is also the One who bears it.

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When the One who decides to crush a creature
becomes the creature who is crushed.

And when the One who does these things
does so to make us righteous.

Abraham's trust in God and God's provision of a ram communicated that God did not want human sacrifice ... God wants us to live not die. Jesus went to the cross and died so that we all might have life eternal.

Paul's letter to the Romans talked to followers of Jesus about our moving from death to life, eternal life. That would not have been possible without Jesus, who taught us not only about death, but how to live and participate in the life eternal God intends for us. Paul says that in our baptisms we share in Jesus' death and resurrection and thereby move from death to life. I'm thinking of this today as we read in the media about the mess ... is there any word better than "mess" that fits? ... in Iran and in the Middle East in general. Why is it that people continue to think that killing others ... men, women, and children ... is an acceptable thing to do in the eyes of God?

Why can we not hear God's word of peace for us? Why can the leaders of the nations and of the peoples not hear God's word for all of God's Creation? Why can we not work harder for peace instead of war?

God wants no more sacrifices. We do not need to kill each other any longer to please God. When we face troubles in our lives, hard times ... the solution is not the elimination of people that we see as opposing us, attacking us, oppressing us ... the solution comes through our Savior, Jesus the Christ, who teaches us to love even our enemies and to find ways to live peaceably together.

That is also true in our personal lives. God does not intend for us to abuse one another within our families. Historically parents have used religious justifications for physical abuse of children. Spouses, particularly men, have used religious justifications for abuse and mistreatment of their spouses. That continues today, all over the world. Let's be clear: if there is physical or verbal abuse in the family or in the church, God disapproves. God's word of peace applies to the nations and to each of us in our own families.

I don't pretend that what I just said is an easy prescription. But it is a Christian prescription.

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In the last century, the Christian author, G.K. Chesterton, wrote "The Christian faith has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried" (What's Wrong With The World, 1910).

As Christians, just as Paul wrote, we need, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to turn our attention from death to life. That re-focusing is not easy. Neither is living as a Christian once we have refocused. I close with another poem from my days in seminary:

LIFE AND DEATH

Are you afraid to die?
shouted the revival preacher.

No, I thought.
Death is easy. It comes to all of us.

I am afraid of living.
Not everybody knows how to live.

I don't mean just pass the time.
I mean living.

Living!
Savoring the life in every moment
friend tree sunset sunrise glass of wine
touch of your lover's hand.

I mean living the Wednesday afternoon
that lasts forever.

The Lord will provide. The Lord has provided. Through our Savior the Lord has provided life eternal. The Lord provides life.

Amen!