

PENTECOST VII

(God) 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 that I shall show you.' Genesis 22:1

When Ken and I were discussing the theme for the sermon and music selections for the week, he said that this is supposed to be *Jesus the Foundation Sunday*. But I was stuck on this lesson from Genesis. I said, 'it should be, *what was God thinking?* Sunday.'

The story of Abraham and Isaac is one I can't be persuaded to appreciate, except as a horror story. I remember arguing once in a sermon that it's one of those texts of terror that we should drop from the cannon, effectively. That it's a text of terror, and one that we should reject as having nothing to do with a tradition we love and learn from.

But alas, it's our tradition, and to ignore it is to fail to acknowledge and deal with our spiritual heritage. Apologists, those who want to redeem the story of Abraham and Isaac, take several approaches. One is that this is a story about faith. God is testing Abraham's faithfulness – in the most extreme and dire way– and Abraham dutifully obeys. And his faith is rewarded; a ram appears to substitute for Isaac, and Isaac is spared. But is this a time to be unquestioningly faithful, blindly obedient?

At other times, Abraham challenges God – over the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, for example– and convinces God to relent. That's already happened. Abraham knows that God can change course. So why doesn't he appeal to God's mercy here?

Another apologetic approach is to say that the story is all about God's generosity. God provides the lamb as a substitute sacrifice. So God, in God's beneficence, saves Isaac from his fate. Well, guess what? It was God who ordered that fate in the first place. God saves Isaac from God's own bloody plan. What's so generous about that?

A third tactic of the apologists – and this one has at least some merit as Biblical historical scholarship, I think, is that this story represents an evolution in the spiritual understanding of the Hebrews. Human sacrifice was indeed practiced in the religions of the ancient world, and the story of Abraham and Isaac tells of the decision, or realization, or what you will, on the part of the Hebrews, that this was something their God did not require, nor desire. And that's good. Elimination of human sacrifice is undoubtedly a good thing.

The narrative has God realizing that, God eliminating human sacrifice, rather than presenting this as a new human comprehension. But that makes it official, God has made a new deal.

I guess my best personal take on this horrific story is that it represents a prophetic moment in salvation history. It foreshadows a shift that will happen in the course of biblical history: the God who's initially portrayed as a ferocious warrior will become the God of peace. Think of Miriam's victory song, "The Lord has triumphed gloriously/ The horse and rider God has thrown into the sea." Think of all the battles God commanded to be fought. The Hebrew people were war-like, as they imagined their God to be.

But in a remarkable spiritual breakthrough, eventually biblical people came to see that violent power is evil power, false, cruel, and ultimately self-defeating. This lesson is learned slowly and partially: in Jesus' time, many of his followers still are expecting and hoping for a Messiah who will lead the Jews to military triumph and superiority. But the trend, perhaps foreshadowed in the sparing of Isaac, the trend is away from a God who demands bloody sacrifice of individuals and armies, and toward a God who dreams of justice and peace.

The Israelites were the first people in history to regard a nation's reliance upon force as evil. They were a practical people, and they learned that force begets force, and violence blows back on you. Paul tells the Galatians, *Love your neighbor as yourself.¹ If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.*

And Paul is continuing a theme that echoes throughout the bulk of Hebrew Scripture. Throwing horses and chariots into the sea ceased to be seen as a praiseworthy act, or a holy one. *Neither by might nor by power, but by the Spirit of God, will the people be saved, says Zechariah. The nations shall see and be ashamed of all their might, proclaims Micah, and you cannot build Zion in bloodshed.* The theology evolved from The Lord is a Warrior to God as the Lord of Peace. And Jesus preaches peace, peace among people, peace among nations.

Earlier Christianity continued its opposition to war and military might until, in the Fourth Century, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. And Empires thrive on war, not peace. Empires depend upon armies to defend their boundaries and extend their holdings. And so Christian theologians, absorbed into a world of power and wars, began to develop a theology of war. We call that Just War theory.

I told Marc Butler a couple of months ago that I was going to preach on Just War theory, and then other topics presented themselves and intervened. But when I saw the reading from Genesis for today, the whole question surfaced again in my mind. There are a number of criteria for what constitutes, in theory, a just war, and I can't do justice to any of them, really, one sermon. But let me list them and let us consider them in relation to the war in Iraq.

First, a **just cause**, and defense is the only just cause. Aggressive or preemptive wars do not qualify as just. Second, **declaration by competent authority**, which in the case of the United States is the Congress. The last time Congress declared war was in 1945, and so all subsequent wars we have waged have been undeclared, illegal, and invalid according to just war theory.

Third, **right intention**: you are going to war for the reasons *you say you are*. You can't claim defense concerns or even regime change if your real goal is access to oil, for example. And right intention means that war must be waged to serve justice and eventuate in peace. And the service of justice must be apparent in how the burden of war is shared throughout society. How many of us, how many Americans altogether, feel or share the pain of the current war?

The fourth criterion is noncombatant immunity, that is, protection of innocent civilians. That does not fit well with shock and awe. The fifth, which harkens back to right intention, is **last resort**. This tells us that taking the option of violence when alternatives such as diplomacy and foreign aid are neglected is unacceptable. And finally, **proportionality**: the violence of war must achieve more good than harm. This is a measure that generally can be answered only in retrospective, but with the development of more and more weapons of mass destruction, the likelihood decreases that this criterion can be met.

I want to focus back on a couple of these, because they seem particularly pertinent to the current situation in our country and perhaps even to our Hebrew Scripture for this morning. I think back to Isaac, and the nightmare scenario in which the long-awaited son of Abraham and Sarah will be offered up in bloody sacrifice to what? To God? And for what? No reason is even given.

And what's happening in the current Iraq War? The children of the poor are being offered bonuses to enlist and then sent off into harm's way, fracturing families, getting killed or badly injured or returning traumatized and broken in spirit. And for what? And who is protesting? Do we hear massive numbers of Christians raising our voices to object

to a class-based approach to waging war, or question the right intention of the war we are in?

Well, I think we know the answers and I think we know the reasons for the answers, or some of them. Since 9/11, to question our country's military direction or the means to support that direction has all too frequently been labeled as disloyalty, lack of patriotism, treason. Nationalism is invoked – sadly and ironically we are exhorted to support our great nation in her warlike endeavors at a time when our reputation internationally is in the cellar. We are instructed to be loyal when we have so little to be proud of, when we have so many questions about what it means to be faithful to a country engaged in misguided and unethical and perhaps illegal war.

And progressive religion has not offered much in the way of leadership or guidance or support, I'm afraid. Religious practitioners from conservative traditions have another story. Very often, their nationalism and patriotism and their religious fervor are all intertwined, and our political leaders have capitalized on those connections. The message, all too relentlessly conveyed, has been that to be American means to be Christian and to be American and Christian means to be supportive of our administrations policies.

And I go back to Abraham, who seems to me in the story from this morning to be blindly following God's cruel and arbitrary orders, without asking why, without protesting, without looking for an alternative. To me, there are no heroes here. In the end, God changes God's mind, and offers promise for a future of compassion, justice, and peace. God redeems the situation, and that's a note of hope. But I'm not sure it redeems the story.

The redemption comes later. Redemption comes over and over again, of course, in salvation history, but the redemption I'm thinking of is Jesus' death in the struggle against tyranny. Here is the true model for Christians, and for our stance in relation to oppressive power and violence. We say no.

Jesus died in the struggle for justice. He carried within him the understanding of his prophetic ancestors that only through justice can peace prevail. *The fruit of righteousness will be peace; the effect of righteousness will be quietness and confidence forever*, Isaiah proclaims. *No peace without justice*, our bumper stickers proclaim, and they echo that ancient wisdom, that Jesus wisdom.

I suspect that I am preaching to the choir here this morning, as I outline just war theory and suggest how sinfully far from conforming to any part of that theory are the

acts of our current administration. I suspect I'm not converting anyone, and I certainly have no brilliant answers or solutions about how as a congregation of faithful Christians we address the sins being enacted in our names, as Americans.

What I have tried to do this morning is to offer some theology to undergird our vague progressive intuition that things are not right, that this war is not acceptable in terms of our Christian tradition's understanding. And by doing so, to encourage us all to speak up more, not just about our politics but about our faith, about our faithful objection to violence in all its forms, to unjust war, and to blind patriotism. I ask us to find our prophetic voices, and to use them in the cause of justice and peace. And I will close with the promise Jesus gives us in today's Gospel, *Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous.*

Alleluia! Amen

I am indebted for much of the material in this sermon to Daniel Maguire's **The Horrors We Bless: Rethinking the Just War Legacy.**