



St. Luke's East Hampton

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Benjamin Shambaugh

June 28, 2026; Proper 8A: Genesis 22:1-14; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42

For a second week in a row, we have some challenging texts. For a second week in a row, I want to dive right in. Last week we heard the story of Sarah's rejection of Hagar and Ishmael, done in order to insure that Isaac would receive the inheritance of Abraham. A few minutes ago we heard how all of her efforts were almost lost by Abraham sacrificing Isaac to God.

In trying to make sense of this passage, we need to remember that human sacrifice was a very common practice in the ancient world. A month or so ago, I talked about being in the valley of Megiddo in Israel. When we were there, we were shown ruins said to be from the time of King Solomon. In the middle of the ruins, there was a place where archeologists had dug to the level of a much earlier period and uncovered a round structure that we joked looked like a Camembert cheese. (I was with a group from France!) We chuckled until the guide told us that we were looking at a Canaanite altar used for human sacrifice. I will never forget seeing bloody handprints of priests painted on Mayan temples where the same thing happened in the Yucatan. Human sacrifice was a common practice in the ancient world until about 2000 years before Christ, when at least for the followers of Abraham, it stopped. From this moment on, God would provide the offering. After the destruction of the temple in 69CE Judaism stopped animal sacrifices as well. Christians agreed with all of this, except when it came to Jesus.

For many Christians, the near sacrifice of Isaac prefigures the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. They would tell you the difference is that while Abraham did not sacrifice his son, God followed through in a sacrifice that lasted forever. As is clear in our reading from Romans, Jesus' sacrifice is central to much of Christian thought. A little scrutiny, however, raises some questions. How is this supposed to work? Who demanded the sacrifice? Who set that price? What did it accomplish? While there are other variations, there are three traditional responses to these questions.[1] The first, called the Ransom or Christus Victor Theory of the Atonement comes from St. John the Divine. It says that because of sin the devil held all of humanity captive, that God gave Jesus to the devil as a ransom to set us free, but that Jesus tricked the devil by victorious from the dead. (Think here of Jesus as our "get out of jail free card.") The second, called the Moral Influence theory of the Atonement comes from Peter Abelard. It says that Jesus' death on the cross was an example of obedience, martyrdom, and love for others that we are to follow. (Think here of Jesus leading a cosmic game of "Simon Says.") The third, called the Satisfaction theory of the Atonement comes from St. Anselm. It says that we owed a debt to God because of our sins, but that Christ's death substituted and otherwise paid the price for our own. (Think here of God paying the price of our parking ticket to him.)

To me, none of these theories is a good match for the story of the near sacrifice of Isaac. First, tying Jesus' crucifixion with the near sacrifice of Isaac ignores the theology of the Trinity that Jesus is God in human form – not God's subordinate child but God's incarnate self. Second, these theories of the atonement presuppose an angry or vengeful deity who - like a police officer with a radar gun waiting for speeders - is just waiting for us to trip up or assumes we already have. These theories suggest a God who created original sin and then condemns us for having it! That does not match with the God who rescued Ishmael last week and who provides an unexpected way out for Isaac today. It also, by the way, does not describe the God I believe in at all.

My theory is that sacrifice was part of ancient religious practices not because God wanted it but because it made sense to the primitive piety of the people from that time. Jesus' teaching was about forgiveness and grace, not punishment and guilt. And, if you dig into the Hebrew scriptures, you will find that sacrifice wasn't a high priority there either. In Hosea 6:6 (quoted by Jesus in Matthew 9:13) God says, "I desire mercy not sacrifice." In Isaiah (1:11), God says, saying, "I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and goats." And, in case we didn't get the message, God speaks through Amos (Amos 5:21) and says, "I hate, I despise your festivals and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies." I am suggesting that rather than foreshadowing a future sacrifice, the story of Abraham and Isaac is one of those great turning points in history after which sacrifice would never be needed again. As I said during Holy Week, the cross was a Roman way of punishing political opponents. Jesus was crucified because his life and teaching were a threat to the Roman power structure. He died because the people were too afraid to stand up to the government and religious authorities in front of them and went along with the crowd instead. Jesus didn't die for our sins. Jesus died because of them, because we - and the world we live in - are separated from God. For me, the purpose of Jesus is found in his life not his death. Think about this for a moment. Though Jesus says, "I came that you might have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10), the Nicene Creed skips from Jesus being born from the Virgin Mary to being crucified under Pilate, saying nothing at all about his life. The traditional Eucharist Prayers do the same thing. This glitch has had a huge impact on Christian thinking. Imagine how different our church and our world might be if a sentence or two were added about how Jesus lived? Jesus' life is the focus of a fourth theory of the Atonement, the Non-violent Theory of the Atonement described by theologian J Denny Weaver in his book of the same name.[2]

The Non-violent Theory of the Atonement is based on the idea that Jesus came not to show us how to die but how to live. This is eminently biblical. Consider, for example, the quintessential words from the prophet Micah (6:8): "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" This theme is picked up in today's gospel where Jesus says (Matthew 10:40-42) "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. 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; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple-- truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward."

If sin is separation from God and a gap between who we and our world are and who and what God created us to be, then Romans 3:23 is right, all have sinned. Atonement, “at-one-ment” or reconciliation with God is important.... but it’s about life, not death. Contrary to those fire and brimstone preachers, Christianity isn’t primarily about where we go after we die. It is about who we are and what we do when we are alive. Orchestral instruments tune to a concert A. A-tone-ment, getting in tune with God, is another way of looking at what we are talking about. The New Testament says that Abraham was made a friend of God (Romans 3:4, Galatians 3:6, James 2:23) because he lived out his faith. The story of Abraham and Isaac is one of those great turning points of history, when God transformed what could have been a violent action into an action of non-violent atonement and hope. The message is that God provides. Jesus didn’t come to show us how to die. Jesus came to show us how to live. May we live as if we believe that is true.

[1] The three classical theories of the atonement are perhaps best described in Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement by Gustaf Aulen (1969). For a brief summary, go to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atonement_in_Christianity

[2] J. Denny Weaver The Nonviolent Atonement (Eerdmans Press, 2011) <http://www.eerdmans.com/Products/6437/the-nonviolent-atonement.aspx>