

“Those we sacrifice“

- You know, these readings given to us on Sundays by the lectionary for Year A are not easy passages of scripture
 - They are tough when the world around us is somewhat calm
 - But as Mother Lisa pointed out last week, they are particularly difficult and cause a lot of emotions to arise in us when times are tough
 - When we are already stressed, anxious, afraid- these passages do not offer much comfort
 - Today is no different, but if we can see through the discomfort I believe our readings today offer us a very modern and timely lesson
 - To get started, let's start on a light note, and we will get to the heavy parts in a moment
 - On the lightest of notes, as a way to go deeper into these texts and our modern context, I want to tell you about a hobby of mine:
 - I enjoy the occasional video game- once a geek, always a geek
 - I have played the online games like WoW, and I enjoy Star Trek Online on occasion
 - But my favorite type of video game is Strategy games, like Civilization, or Command and Conquer, and even the board game Risk
 - I like to build up my nation or city, expand my military, and then invade the neighbor's cities and territories
 - I know that many of the units will not survive- but they are sacrificed to win the game
 - And when you're done, you log off, or pack up the game, and go on with life because it was just a game
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 - What may be just part of a winning strategy on a video or board game, turns sinister and sinful when it is used in our society
 - And here is where I would like you to go a little deeper with me
 - The tragic thing is that we do sacrifice people, groups of people, and it is not a game, not fiction- it's real right here in our country

- And in fact, with our reading from Genesis, and our gospel reading this morning,
- I believe we can make certain that in God's eyes there is no one who is expendable, no one who is a means to an end
- No one should be sacrificed for the status quo
- You may be wondering how I started thinking of computer games, and well to be honest it was this notion of sacrifice
- In particular with our infamous reading from Genesis this morning where God tests Abraham
- As we read in horror, God instructs Abraham to offer his son Issac as a burnt offering
- This is a tough text- there's no way around it.
- Phyllis Tickle calls this text the "text of terror." ¹
- I do not like preaching on it, but it is one of those passages that I don't think we can pretend doesn't exist.
- Abraham surely feels caught in a very difficult situation with no easy way out, and perhaps wondering what the right answer is
- We know from the beginning of this text that God is testing Abraham.
- This interaction between God and Abraham is strangely captivating and worrisome.
- It bothers us on several levels: first, it causes us to wonder about God
- What kind of God is this?
- Why would God instruct Abraham to kill his son, which is in direct violation of his own list of commandments
- Going through with this command would call into question God's promise of many descendants
- Perhaps we even feel some sympathy for Abraham, having been placed in such a catch 22 situation, between a rock and a hard place. ²
 - Having to chose between impossible options
- There are many aspects here that cause us worry
- But what bothers me the most here is Abraham's silence- he did not object at all ³
- God says go do this, and Abraham gets up the next morning.

¹ <http://processandfaith.org/resources/lectionary-commentary/years/2011-06-26/proper-8a>

² *Challenging Prophetic Literature*, Julia O'Brien writes about Lyn, a student of hers. Juliana Claassens, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=6/26/2011

³ Juliana Claassens, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=6/26/2011

- Perhaps, however, this silence is key to understanding this story better
- We know how this story ends- we know that even though Abraham is ready to go through with it, God is not.
 - Thank God.
 - Isaac is saved at the last minute, and God provides a sacrificial substitute.
 - I have heard this text interpreted as an object lesson on obedience
 - I have heard this text used to foreshadow Christ's substitutional sacrifice for us
 - But none of that dodges the very real concerns in this text.
 - What psychological damage has this inflicted?
 - On Isaac? On Abraham? On Sarah.
 - We know in the next two verses Sarah dies, and I wonder just how much the stress of this event contributed to that.
 - I think as we read this passage with its warts and all, we can take it as a cautionary tale on a few levels
 - First, I am not sure that Abraham passed God's test- I cannot help but think that God was really wanting Abraham to object, or fight back
 - I wonder if God was hoping Abraham would talk it over as he did with Sodom and Gomorrah
 - Where Abraham bravely negotiated with God to save the cities
 - Abraham asks God just two chapters before: Would you destroy the righteous along with the unrighteous
 - If I find only fifty righteous, would you save the city for those fifty?
 - What about 45, 40, 30, 20-- what if I find 10 righteous.
 - And God, at each step, agreed to Abraham's proposals
 - I can only imagine how this story might have gone differently if Abraham was willing to do the same for Isaac
 - Indeed, I think God is wanting us to "go to bat" for the innocent, the oppressed, the powerless
 - And certainly, without a doubt, the lesson from this unfortunate scene is that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,
 - The God who laid the foundations of the world, and created each of us
 - Does not desire human sacrifice.
 - This was not true for some of the surrounding cultures and religions at the time of Abraham.
 - And I would argue that in a different way, we too need to hear this one again in the year 2020

- In fact, our Gospel reading points us to the sacrifice that God does desire
 - It's short today, only two verses, and is really the conclusion to the passage from last week
 - When we give a cup of cold water to one of these little ones, we will receive a reward
 - And when we welcome others, we welcome Jesus, and the One who sent him
 - When paired with Genesis, it seems that instead of the willingness to sacrifice someone else because we believe it is right
 - Jesus is saying that the only sacrifice God desires is our own self-sacrifice.
 - The sacrifice of our safety, or in other words to become vulnerable, in order to extend welcome and hospitality.
 - The sacrifice of our resources, even if they are as small as a cup of water, to help someone who needs it
 - Indeed, Paul says in Romans that we are to be living sacrifices to God, allowing all we have and all we are to be used for God's Kingdom
 - And the benefit of those around us.
- Today, I am appreciative of these passages of Scriptures
 - It always amazes me how timely they are and how much the Holy Spirit uses them in our current contexts
 - Even though they are on a fixed three year rotation
 - Because how helpful is it, even with the concerning parts of the story about Abraham and Isaac
 - How appropriate it is to hear one more time that God does not approve of the sacrifice of other people
 - Now I know in this country we do not put people on altars and go through the burnt sacrificial actions like they did to the lambs in the Old Testament
 - But I dare say that we in America today still, without much thought and maybe even unconsciously
 - We are willing to sacrifice certain groups of people for our betterment,
 - One of the easiest places to see it today is based on race
 - We are willing to sacrifice the lives and dignity of brown skin people coming across the border, and we put their children in cages
 - We are willing to sacrifice the lives and dignity of black skin people, first with slavery, then lynchings and Jim Crow laws

- And since then with systemic violence and prejudice that has blocked them from good neighborhoods, good schools.
 - And the tools to build generational wealth.
- It's not just race, but sacrifice based on class
- Did you read that book *White Trash* by Nancy Isenberg? She claims there has been an entire class of white "throw away" people
- We have been willing to sacrifice poor white people as means to economic ends
- These days in America, we are even willing to become so politically polarized that we are willing to sacrifice the other side for our goals
- Producing violence, theft, vandalism, and even death
- Like the pieces in a big board game, we can so quickly decide that someone or some group is unworthy, expendable, sacrificial
- And God says "NO", just like he did to Abraham.
- God says there is another way to accomplish those goals, another way to bring about the Kingdom of God
- Another way to live together
- It can start when we are able to give of our selves- self sacrifice- for the good of the other.
- As Christians, we believe that the only sacrifice needed has already been made
 - God came in the flesh and sacrificed God's self on that cross
 - To expose the sacrificial system that was and is still in place,
 - To pull back the curtain on how power structures that are in place will sacrifice people to remain in place, i.e. Roman Empire and Church aligned with politics.
 - And God, like God did with Abraham and Isaac, told us once again through the resurrection of Jesus Christ that sacrifice does not work
 - It is not the way
 - The way is love. The way is self-sacrifice to help others, through simple actions like cups of water
 - And big actions like demanding justice and equality for all
 - Who do you see on the altar of sacrifice today?
 - God is still saying to us, Unbind them and let them go.
 - There's a better way.

Amen.