

Proper 8 Yr A. Sermon.

***The Sacrifice Asked of You.*** July 2, 2023

The reading of Abraham binding Isaac for sacrifice is disturbing. It cries out for explanation. Because of the challenges the text poses as a “***text of terror***,” few preachers develop sermons from it. Nonetheless, it begs for explanation.

Let’s hear again the second verse:

*After these things, God says to Abraham “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. 22:2).*

It’s a horrible story -- a “*text of terror*”! What God would ever command such a thing? ...And, what parent would ever follow such a command!? A literal, fundamentalist reading of the text insists that God as we know God would. That is a mis-reading. Are such burnt offering what God wants of us?

Our message begins with historical~ context.

Approximately nine years ago, a paper based on archaeological findings in Northern Africa, specifically Carthage, Tunisia, rocked the academic world. It concluded that the ancient Carthaginians in all likelihood practiced child sacrifice, and, that the ritual sacrifice of children may have been fairly common throughout this part of the world—including ancient Israel.

There in Carthage, Tunisia, archaeologists discovered a burial site, covering over 64,000 square feet, spanning nine levels deep, where the Carthaginians sacrificed their children as

burnt offerings to various gods. They uncovered over 20,000 urns stuffed with the cremated ashes and bone fragments of young children, suggesting that the practice took place over several centuries.

The findings at Carthage and similar sites gives evidence corroborating the practice of child sacrifice in Israel.

There is other evidence: the Books of Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, Judges, Kings, and Jeremiah all refer to child sacrifice in one way or another, often in the form of laws and proclamations condemning and forbidding the practice—a fact that itself strengthens the conclusion that child sacrifice really did happen in ancient Israel.

Naturally, we recoil in horror at the thought of the sacrifice of a single child, let alone a cultural practice of this magnitude. Scholars of antiquity remind us that it is “very difficult for us to recapture people’s motivations for carrying out this practice or why parents would agree to it. ....Perhaps it was out of profound religious piety, or a sense that the good~ the sacrifice could bring the family or community as a whole~ outweighed the life of the child....

We are scandalized by thinking of Abraham and of ancients killing their children in the name of God. But, 2,500 years ago,” people looked at things differently. So, we take care in judging ancient Near-Eastern practices from~ our 21st-century American vantage point. More appropriately, we ask, *How far have we come?*

*Every* generation tells itself that it wants to build a better world, not for its own sake, but for the sake of “the children.” Yet, in every generation, we practice some form of child

sacrifice, whether we mean to or not.

### **Indeed, how far have we come!**

- On the altar of individual rights, we have sacrificed our children's ability to priority the common good.
- On the altar of *feel-goodism*, we have sacrificed our ability to have historical truth taught to youth about the founding sins of our nation – genocide, enslavement, oppression.
- On the altar of fake news, we have sacrificed our children's ability to distinguish truth from lies.
- On the altar of unregulated gun ownership, we have sacrificed our children's safety and emotional wellbeing in classrooms and offices, in parks and concert halls and supermarkets and movie theaters.
- On the altar of partisan rancor, we have sacrificed our children's faith in democratic institutions and elected officials.
- On the altar of sanctimonious, **idol-worship of out-of-context bible interpretation**, we have condemned and sacrificed our LGBTQ children to self-hatred, mental distress, and suicide.
- On the altar of technology, we have sacrificed our children's desire to engage in real, live community.

And every day that we refuse to take **bold action** to curb climate change, reduce carbon emissions, and make the sacrifices necessary to invest in renewable energy on a global scale, is a day~ that we are making a burnt offering of our planet – a hell on earth for our children and grandchildren to weather, or clean up—if they can.

Thirty years ago, more than 15 hundred prominent scientists, including over half of the world's Nobel laureates, issued a

manifesto titled, “*World Scientists’ Warning to Humanity.*” It stated: “A great change in our stewardship of the earth and the life on it **is required** if~ vast human misery is to be **avoided** and our global home on this planet is not to be **irretrievably** mutilated.”

We have continued in burnt offerings to economies that **destroy** the planet rather than to economies and ways of living that conserve, protect, and renew. The demands of the urgent, the immediate, the here-and-now, **always** seem to override the needs of a “future” lying years or decades or centuries ahead.

Perhaps Abraham was all too willing to go through with the sacrifice of his child, **not** so much, because he was a bad parent but because he was committed to the conventional, normative expectations of his society. ~Who was he~ to question conventional practice.

He could not imagine thinking critically about the social norms that informed his behavior. His~ faith needed to be blind. For him and his society, blind obedience was a virtue. Who was he~ to question the religious certainties of his society, of what it said pleased God? Hah! ...He was a victim of his society’s self-certainties about who God was and what God wanted!

Yet, we call for Abraham to **rise above** normative social expectation, to transcend conventional **ethical** expectations. **Why~** because we know that is what we **ought** to be able to demand of ourselves!

So, we ask, **what does God ask of us?** What does our religious tradition tell us? Drawing from our Judeo-Christian religious tradition, three considerations stand out.

**First**, our religious tradition tells us that God **does** demand **sacrifice**, not of **others**, but of **oneself** for the **sake** of others. The true meaning of sacrifice is our willingness to do the right thing even at great personal risk, the courage to make painful choices right here and now, not for ourselves, but for the future of our people and our world.

The God of the Judeo-Christian religion **does** call for sacrifice from us. We see in Jesus what sacrifice looks like for us. It is the putting our reputations, popularity, or public standing on the line to do what is right, standing up for the vulnerable, raising a voice in protest at injustice and cruelty, at falsehood and the abuse of power.

It asks us to do the hard thing, instead of the convenient thing. The counter-cultural thing, instead of the fashionable thing. The charitable thing, instead of the selfish thing. The holy thing, instead of the ordinary thing.

**Second**, our tradition affirms the possibility of **change**: that **we** can change, and that we can change our world. In a world where so many of us feel stuck, helpless, and powerless to make the changes that this moment demands, to address its perils and evils, **let us yet declare** that change is possible. We begin with ourselves.

In past Lenten observances, we hear the Greek word **metanoia** used, meaning “to turn around.” We are a resurrection people – through grace, able to rise~ from our dead places. We **are** able to turn around to right wrong. After taking of stock a situation, we can consider what needs to be done to be in right relationship with God and neighbor.

Our tradition of confessing our sins, of acknowledging our faults and missteps, and resolving to do better does **not**

assume an overnight change – not so in ourselves, not so in the world. It does tell us that we **can** change, little by little, and that we can leave the world a little better than we found it.

**Third**, our tradition offers us **choice** – choosing **joy** in the face of suffering, **life** in the face of death, **hope** in the face of despair, and, above all, **good** in the face of evil.

**How** we choose to live this tradition matters. It sends a message to the next generation. We can choose to live our faith joyfully and vigorously or we can languish in complacency.

What **does** the Lord require of us? Not really burnt offerings!

**Hear**~ the words of the Hebrew prophet Micah 6: 6-8:

*With what shall I come before the LORD  
and bow myself before God on high?*

*Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,  
with calves a year old?*

*Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?*

*Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"*

*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?*

**Amen!**