

No More of This

Andover Newton Theological School

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The Binding of Isaac (Gen 22.1-12) Susanna and the Elders (Susanna 1-46)

Does this story sound familiar? A beloved son, innocent of sin, given up as a sacrifice – and then a sudden, joyous reversal; death thwarted; the son restored. Jesus' story.

Or this one: An innocent victim seized in a garden, falsely accused by the leaders of the community; shamed, degraded, all in the name of social and religious order; the accusation and finger-pointing spreading through the crowd like a terrifying contagion, the voice of the victim, crying out to heaven, and finally, when all had seemed lost, vindication... Jesus' story.

In each case, the intended violence is said by those who are caught up in it to be religiously necessary; approved – even required – by God. Yet in each case it is God who intervenes to stop the violence. God who sends an angel to halt the sacrifice of Isaac; God who stirs up the spirit of a young man, Daniel, to proclaim Susanna's innocence.

So it is in the gospels. Jesus suffers and dies, we are told, for our sakes. To save us; to atone for our sin; to make things right between us and God. It is curious, then, isn't it, that the story of the passion should be so unrelentingly and unflinchingly terrible, telling of betrayal and terror, abandonment, a crowd suddenly turned against the victim,

ritual humiliation and torture, an unspeakable killing. The death may be redemptive, the Bible seems to say. It may take place to save us. It's still wrong.

If you think about it, so much of the Bible we read and cherish and hand on seems to be having this kind of argument with itself. It gives us heroes and heroines, then unsparingly recounts their sins and shortcomings. It tells the story of a people chosen and redeemed from slavery – and then records how they failed and failed and failed again to be the people God called them to be.

And why, do you suppose, does the Bible carefully preserve so many stories in which God's own justice seems... at best inscrutable; at worst, nonexistent.

"Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love... and offer him as a burnt-offering."

This story has been handed down from one generation to the next for thousands of years. Long after child sacrifice had ceased to be practiced in Israel. Long after its substitute, animal sacrifice, had also faded away. It has survived to be read by people who look on child *spanking* as barbaric. Here it is, on the printed page.

When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.

Does the story have your attention? Then perhaps this is the right moment for an angel to descend, yelling STOP! Here, at the moment of truth-telling.

The Bible tells us that this was a test of Abraham's faith, and that he passed. For us, the non-spanking generations, it doesn't seem like something God would do; not the God we know. But we do know that child sacrifice was a real practice at the time this story likely began circulating, and we know that violence is real and that is always with us. The Bible never pretends otherwise. It never looks the other way.

Could it be that God is asking us, too, not to look the other way?

Could God be asking us to look steadily, honestly, at the whole truth of our human natures – our best, and our worst? The impulse to project our inner warfare onto God, and its opposing impulse, the impulse to listen for God, and be changed? Like the psalmist who boils with religious hatred one moment:

*O that you would kill the wicked, O God,
and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me...
Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord?
And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?*

And then prays in the very next breath,

*Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me,*

and lead me in the way everlasting.

If, as the sages tell us, every human individual is a microcosm – a world in miniature – then every anger, every cruelty, every mistrust and pride, greed and fear and scapegoating impulse we find in the Bible is a part of us as well, at home in our own hearts, side by side with the kindness and generosity and humility that are just as real, and much more acceptable to us.

It is the refusal to believe that, that gets us into trouble. It is the impulses we do not honestly acknowledge that turn dangerous; that are so easily made use of by the forces of evil.

So Peter, who refuses to believe that he could ever, under any circumstances, deny Jesus, denies him three times, vehemently, publicly, that very same night. And all the others “who said the same” turn tail and flee from him, leaving him alone; one man at the mercy of a mob who, just a short time earlier, was hailing Jesus into Jerusalem as savior.

It had to happen this way, we are told. It was part of God’s plan. Jesus died for us, his blood shed for the good of all – a holy and life-giving sacrifice.

But this is just what his executioners claim: Pilate, who intends this death to be a politically redemptive sacrifice restoring order and calm, and the chief priests, who intend it to be a religiously redemptive sacrifice, keeping the stain of Jesus’ blasphemy from infecting the people.

The gospels are having none of it. The gospels tell the truth about what is going on. They tell the story from the point of view of the victim, whose death is a terrible wrong, and always has been, from the foundation of the world, and always will be. Bloodshed is never acceptable to God as a way of making peace, either with one another or with God. Sacrifice and scapegoating are OUR way of keeping human violence in check; find a common enemy, and all hate together. Magic! It works! But pause for a moment and listen, with knife upraised, or stone in hand, finger pointing away from the self to someone else, and you can hear a voice from heaven crying STOP!

No, Jesus' passion is not God's way of doing things. It is, rather, God's way of dealing with our way of doing things. Entering into it as one of its victims – right into the heart of the sacrificial machinery, in order to shatter it from the inside out.

“No more of this.”

For this death, this scapegoating murder, will not be allowed to stand. This time, the killers will not be allowed to have the last word. This victim will not stay dead; he will arise, bearing the marks of his torture, and a word of peace for those who abandoned him.

“See,” he says to them. “No more of this.”

When we gather at his table, we gather in the peace he gave to us. Not as the world gives: enforcing divisions,

victimizing the innocent, demonizing the guilty, but as God gives: faces turned toward one another, seeing one another whole, seeing ourselves whole, forgiven and forgiving, until our hearts are healed. Learning to see the face of Jesus in every suffering human face.

Come. Remember him. And be at peace.