

"The Sacrifice"

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This month we have been spending time with Abraham, the founder of monotheism. His story is about religion, God and nation building. But it is also about the promise of a child to Abraham and his wife Sarah. They were in their 70s when God first promised them a child. Last week, twenty-odd years later, God promises the child will arrive within a year. In today's scripture reading we learn that this wondrous child has been born, his name is Isaac. He is their beloved child.

And today we heard that God's voice has sounded again, this time with a terrifying demand. God has asked Abraham to take this long awaited child to a distant mountain and to sacrifice him to God. To create a fire. To slit his throat and place him on the fire as a burnt offering. The next morning, Abraham starts walking toward the mountain with his son.

How could Abraham say yes? He has waited so long for this son. This son is the key to being the father of nations as God has promised for so long. How can any father hear a voice from God and meekly agree to kill his son?

I suspect that most of you find this story difficult, even repulsive. Abraham is considered one of the heroes of the Bible, but here he seems like a heartless monster. How can this story be part of our faith? We are the love and kindness people, we believe that God is like our parent. How can any parent be willing to kill one of their children whom they have been tasked to protect, even with our lives?

This story has always been controversial. Abraham's silence is maddening. We want to hear his anguish. He should like Hamlet, tortured by this request. But that's not how Biblical characters work. They make choices, they don't wrestle with them. Perhaps they had different personalities than we do. Or perhaps the silence of a character like Abraham is meant to ignite moral wrestling in the minds of the people who hear the story. People like us today.

Scholars have debated this episode for a long time. They point out that in Abraham's time, human sacrifices to gods were normal and expected. Children were often burnt to appease the gods. If so, then this episode stands as a turning point in world history. It is a repudiation of human sacrifice. Going forward, the Israelites will reject human sacrifice, as will Christians after them. That helps take some of the horror out of this story, but not all of it. Abraham still goes along with it, making him seem hard-hearted, and even alien.

To Christians, this story has stood as a foreshadowing of Christ's crucifixion. God tests Abraham, but saves his son. But when it is Jesus' turn, there is no reprieve, no last minute rescue. Christians see many parallels between Isaac and Jesus. A father with a plan. Isaac carries the wood on his shoulder, just as Jesus carries his cross. Isaac meekly agrees to be sacrificed, just as Jesus does despite his worry the night before. And, to our relief, in Isaac's story, he is rescued. In Christ's case, the rescue comes only through the resurrection. His death stands as a sacrifice which takes on the sins of all the world.

The Christian version of the story emphasizes that God never meant Abraham to go through with it, it was always just a test. The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard wrote a classic book, *Fear and Trembling* about Abraham's predicament. Kierkegaard argues that Abraham stands as the most faithful follower of God in history before Jesus. Abraham was willing to give up what he loved most to obey his God. But, Isaac's death would not be God's fault, but Abraham's, something Abraham would live with for the rest of his life. This child was supposed to be the father of nations, and has been Sarah's hope for so long. This request appears to be designed to be as excruciating as possible for Abraham.

No matter what position we take on this story, it sends one clear message: following God can be very hard. God can ask us to do things that we would rather run away from or ignore. Faith is not supposed to be easy. To love our enemies, to help people who have betrayed us, strangers and friends alike, feels impossible. We are called to help the marginalized, people we don't even know. Doing this can be uncomfortable and even dangerous. Christ ended up on a cross. Paul was in and out of jail for years, and was finally executed for his faith. For centuries, Romans executed Christians when they refused to sacrifice to their pagan idols.

There are modern Christian martyrs, too.

MLK

Take Rev. Dr Martin Luther King Junior. His great triumphs were the passage of the Civil Rights act in 1964 and the Voting rights act in 1965. Neither would have been passed without the pressure from the movement he led.

But King didn't stop there. As he examined his society, he saw that poverty was a prime driver of racism. That the state and corporate interests didn't care about poor people, white or black. They sent them to die in Vietnam. In 1968, King was calling for an end to the war, and was openly criticizing capitalism as the enemy of all poor people.

MLK2

He was in Memphis about to launch the Poor People's Campaign. In his last sermon, he called for boycotts of racist stores, and a pooling of Black money to invest in Black banks since white banks weren't helping. That's what he was preaching when he was assassinated. Caring for the poor and vulnerable was dangerous in Christ's time, and it still is.

There is nothing new about faith asking us to do hard things. It's right there at the beginning with Abraham and God's terrible request. Is faith primarily a source of comfort, a sort of spiritual spa? Is faith a place we go to be comforted? Yes, it certainly is. When we pray regularly, we can feel a calm rise within us that is comforting. Meditators know that feeling well. When we come to worship, we feel community, mutual support and friendship. We sing with joy. The life of faith offers many ways to find the quiet centre, as the hymn promises. We are offered a way to drink from a spiritual watering hole.

But that is just one part of the faith journey. The modern Christian theologian Brian MacLaren has compared faith to fire fighting. Firefighters hate fire - they hate how it destroys buildings, how it hurts and even kills people. So they spend many years training how to fight fires. They do this so that when the alarm sounds, they can run into the fire to rescue people. MacClaren says that we Christians are called to be firefighters. We are called not to watch the fires, or turn our backs on them. We are called to run into them to put them out.

Two Saturdays ago, I was invited to a conference dedicated to discussing issues that affect people of African descent.

Conference

The meeting was attended by people who had come from African nations, recently or many years ago. They told stories of the anti-Black racism they encounter. But they also shared ways in which they could help each other get ahead in Toronto.

How to save money to create businesses. How to find housing. How to stay hopeful in this country where there is too little help from the government.

I sat at a table with a Black American who had recently moved to Canada. She was the descendent of enslaved African Americans. She admitted she didn't know too much about the history of racism in Canada. So, I filled her in on a few of the basics, suggested a few books that she could read. I wish I didn't have to tell her that the anti-Black racism she knew in the States was here, too. That we like to deny that we had slavery, but we did. We like to deny that we had segregation, but we did.

Viola Desmond ten dollar bill

That's why Viola Desmond is on our ten dollar bill. In 1946, she got in trouble for sitting in the whites-only section of a movie theatre in Nova Scotia. She fought the fine, and lost, at great personal and professional cost.

As Canadians, we like to pretend that everything is okay here, that we are a multicultural paradise. But it isn't true. 58% of the homeless people in Toronto are Black. Indigenous people are over represented living on the streets and in our jails. Systemic racism is alive and well here.

Fight Clubs

Just last week, the CBC reported that white supremacist groups have been training in hand to hand combat in parks in Hamilton, in anticipation of a race war. They are also practicing in other cities.

As Christians, we are asked to make choices. Do we follow Jesus only when it makes us feel good, or do we follow Jesus all the way? If religion is just a way to calm down and feel good, to relieve stress, then we will avoid learning about how unjust our society is. We will avoid getting into situations where we must protest injustice. We will avoid taking positions or supporting the vulnerable which might get us in trouble with friends and family. We can take that route.

Historically, many Christians have and still do. They go to churches where they want to escape politics and difficult subjects.

But I hope it is clear that our Messiah never avoided trouble to defend the oppressed. Jesus never backed down from an argument with his critics. He never turned down someone who needed healing. And most importantly, He didn't run away from when the government came to arrest him. Jesus walked towards trouble. He walked into the fire. He prays alone, and then he helps. That's his M.O. Christians are supposed to be trouble makers. We are to spread God's love, and when people want to shut us down, we are called to stand strong and keep going. Even when it is uncomfortable.

Comfortable Christians have caused a lot of trouble in this world. They supported the transatlantic slave trade. They started residential schools. But it was Christians who were willing to be uncomfortable who ended slavery in Canada and Britain. The United Church was being uncomfortable when we became the first denomination to apologize for residential schools. We were uncomfortable when we declared that people of all sexualities could be ministers and congregants. We lost a third of our membership over that decision. It was a very uncomfortable situation. But who of us would want us to go back?

If modern Christianity is about comfort, then people with terrible ideas and policies will win. All they have to do is be more committed to injustice than we are to justice.

God called on Abraham to make a hard choice. God knew that Abraham would be stopped from killing his son. We will not be asked to kill our own to serve God. But the call to serve, even when difficult, continues. There is a fire raging near us, and that fire is already smouldering here. Like firefighters, we are offered time to rest and train, but more fires will come, and we need to be ready to act, together, justly, writing letters, speaking out, standing up for what is right.

We are called to do what we can to share God's love, even if when it is difficult. Our reward is that our faith will be richer. Our reward is that we will sleep better at night, and others will, too. Ame