

“The Promise”

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Genesis 22:1-14

Mark 9:2-29

‘Isaac said,

“Father, we have the coals and the wood, but where is the lamb for the sacrifice?”

“My son,” Abraham answered, “God will provide the lamb.”

The two of them walked on...’

Genesis 22:7-8

Let us pray... O God,

Keep us from terrible choices, but help us respect those sacrifices  
made on our behalf and for all people.

Amen

‘The Transfiguration of Jesus’ and ‘the Healing of the Epileptic Child’  
are literally the first Biblical stories I learned by heart.

When I was at Lancaster Theological Seminary,

I came across a wonderful reference book called The Synoptic Gospels.

This particular version put all four gospels side by side in columns on the same page,  
with the Greek text on the left and English on the right.

This marvelous tool helped scholars find similarities in sentence structure and phrases  
to make comparisons between the Gospels.

That’s how they knew for example that much of the Gospel of Mark  
can be found in Luke and Matthew,

and that they basically follow Mark’s sequence of events.

But what it helped me to see was how the Gospel stories that preceded or followed  
a particular story were linked.

That sounds like that should be obvious,

But consider how often we hear the Bible lessons in church each Sunday  
as anecdotes that stand alone to teach us a particular lesson.

When we see how they are linked, they can introduce us to a larger narrative theme –  
and that’s what is happening here...

Last Sunday, we heard how Jesus was walking with his disciples in the northern region  
of Caesarea-Phillipi, when he happened to ask them who they thought he was.

Though Peter gave the right answer – that Jesus was the Messiah,  
he still didn’t understand what this meant.

Jesus tried to explain in what appears to be a statement of fact about life:

The Son of Man, the True Heir of Humanity

will be rejected by the powers of society, suffer and die...

Willard, p.2

The 1960s were a time of tremendous social unrest when many traditions and institutions were directly challenged.

There was a terrible backlash – especially against those who were perceived to be the agents of change, like John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Robert Kennedy.

They were all cut down in midlife by assassination just as Mohandas Gandhi, Abraham Lincoln – and Jesus of Nazareth before them. It would seem to be a sad principle about life that those who take upon themselves the prophetic role of peacemaker ‘must suffer many things and be treated with contempt’ – even death.

The pop singer Dion lamented this reality in his song, “Abraham, Martin, and John”, asking about each of them:  
*Can you tell me where he's gone?  
He freed a lot of people,  
But it seems the good they die young.  
I just looked 'round and he's gone.*

Now, there are all kinds of conspiracy theories out there and some may actually be in fact.

But isn't it true in life that when ‘the powers that be’ get threatened, they take action by identifying a scapegoat.

It's kind of a shell game, really, because it takes everyone's attention off what the powerbrokers are doing. It's a vicious cycle of “Name, blame, and shame” that provides humanity with a superficial peace.

But Christ adds a ‘promise’ to this ‘principle’ by daring to say that the Son of Man, the True Heir of Humanity will not only suffer and die, but ‘on the third day, rise’.

William Cullen Bryant once said,  
*Truth, crushed to earth, shall rise again;  
The eternal years of God are hers;  
But Error, wounded, writhes with pain,  
And dies among his worshippers.*

And so we have the example of Christ, who was ‘crushed to earth’ yet rises again.

It has been difficult for me to understand why the Son of Man who is also the Son of God should have been treated so cruelly by humanity. And thanks to the theories of anthropologist, Rene Girard, one explanation is that it took the perfect Son of God to be accused and abused in this way – for in the process his innocence would be recognized and this vicious cycle would be broken.

Willard, p.3

And so, the sacrifice of Lincoln, Gandhi, King, the Kennedys,  
as well as the nameless and countless martyrs who have fallen victim  
to genocides, holocausts, and ethnic cleansing of every sort, ever since,  
have been recognized through the lens of Christ's example  
of innocence prevailing despite injustice.

Jesus' transfiguration included the elements of visual and auditory epiphanies  
in which he is observed by the disciples as having a transformed appearance,  
being in consultation with heroes of Jewish antiquity, Moses and Elijah,  
and the affirmation of God's voice from the midst of a cloud.

It is in keeping with Jesus' words that some of them would see the Kingdom of God  
coming into power.

These powerful manifestations were intended to impress the disciples,  
but they could not remain on the mountaintop.

They would have to return to the valley below.

And in his talk with the disciples as they descend the mountain,  
Jesus still seemed to be troubled.

And when they arrive where the other disciples had been waiting,  
they encounter what must have been  
one of the most terrifying situations for people back then –  
a child going through an epileptic fit  
which they imagined to be demon-possession.

Jesus, though, appears to be more concerned about the disciples' quarrelling  
with those religious experts – even irritated.

But he relents when he says,

“How long am I to bear with you...” then he calls for the child.

What follows is a very dramatic exchange between Jesus and the father  
who admits his doubt yet calls out anyway for his child to be helped  
from this terrible condition of self-destructive behavior.

Jesus prevails against the disease and heals this child;

At the same time – by addressing the epilepsy as an “evil spirit”,  
he also heals the crowd of people from their fear and doubt –  
and perhaps his own fear and doubt, too.

We have been following the narrative events that lead up to Jesus' decision  
to go to Jerusalem for the Passover and a collision course  
with the powers that be of his time.

Moses had to face the pharaoh and magicians of Egypt,

Elijah confronted Jezabel and the priests of Baal,

and Jesus likewise would stand against the power of Rome  
and the high priests of his own people – to be crushed to earth,  
yet rise again.

Willard, p.4

As they went into a house – which must have been that family's home,  
to celebrate their son's miraculous healing,  
the disciples quietly asked Jesus in the midst of all the hoopla,  
“Why could we not cast it out?”  
He tells them that it must be through prayer and fasting –  
which is just another way of saying faith and hard work...

The dream for Beloved Community that Martin Luther King spoke about  
did not end with his passing – and neither has the Kingdom of God  
for they are the same thing.

Jesus got angry with his disciples because he expected them to do better;  
He expected them to be able to do what he did –  
teaching with authority, healing with hope and humor,  
finding a way when there is no way, driving out evil spirits of fear and despair,  
creating community.

It's possible, but apparently it's not easy.  
Yet the journey is its own reward.

And Dion's song goes on to say:

*Didn't you love the things that they stood for?  
Didn't they try to find some good for you and me?  
And we'll be free Some day soon, and it's a-gonna be  
one day ...*

Amen

*Today's lesson comes from Genesis 22:1-14 and tells about  
the dramatic testing of Abraham who was told  
to sacrifice Isaac – Abraham & Sarah's only son...*

<sup>1</sup>Some years later God decided to test Abraham, so he spoke to him.  
Abraham answered, "Here I am, LORD."

<sup>2</sup>The LORD said,

"Go get Isaac, your only son,  
the one you dearly love!  
Take him to the land of Moriah,  
and I will show you a mountain  
where you must sacrifice him to me  
on the fires of an altar."

<sup>3</sup>So Abraham got up early the next morning and chopped wood for the fire.  
He put a saddle on his donkey and left with Isaac and two servants  
for the place where God had told him to go.

<sup>4</sup>Three days later Abraham looked off in the distance and saw the place.

<sup>5</sup>He told his servants,

"Stay here with the donkey,  
while my son and I go over there to worship.  
We will come back."

<sup>6</sup>Abraham put the wood on Isaac's shoulder,  
but he carried the hot coals and the knife.

As the two of them walked along,

<sup>7-8</sup>Isaac said, "Father, we have the coals and the wood,  
but where is the lamb for the sacrifice?"

"My son," Abraham answered,

"God will provide the lamb."

The two of them walked on,

and <sup>9</sup>when they reached the place that God had told him about,  
Abraham built an altar and placed the wood on it.

Next, he tied up his son and put him on the wood.

<sup>10</sup>He then took the knife and got ready to kill his son.

<sup>11</sup>But the LORD's angel shouted from heaven,  
"Abraham! Abraham!"

"Here I am!" he answered.

<sup>12</sup>"Don't hurt the boy or harm him in any way!" the angel said.

"Now I know that you truly obey God,  
because you were willing to offer him your only son."

<sup>13</sup>Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught by its horns in the bushes.

So he took the ram and sacrificed it in place of his son.

<sup>14</sup>Abraham named that place

"The LORD Will Provide."

And even now people say,

"On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided."

Mark 9:2-29 [RSV]

[2] And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves; and he was transfigured before them,

[3] and his garments became glistening, intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them.

[4] And there appeared to them Eli'jah with Moses; and they were talking to Jesus.

[5] And Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is well that we are here; let us make three booths, one for you and one for Moses and one for Eli'jah."

[6] For he did not know what to say, for they were exceedingly afraid.

[7] And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him."

[8] And suddenly looking around they no longer saw any one with them but Jesus only.

[9] And as they were coming down the mountain, he charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of man should have risen from the dead.

[10] So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what the rising from the dead meant.

[11] And they asked him, "Why do the scribes say that first Eli'jah must come?"

[12] And he said to them, "Eli'jah does come first to restore all things; and how is it written of the Son of man, that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt?

[13] But I tell you that Eli'jah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him."

[14] And when they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd about them, and scribes arguing with them.

[15] And immediately all the crowd, when they saw him, were greatly amazed, and ran up to him and greeted him.

[16] And he asked them, "What are you discussing with them?"

[17] And one of the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a dumb spirit;

[18] and wherever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able."

[19] And he answered them, "O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me."

[20] And they brought the boy to him; and when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth.

[21] And Jesus asked his father, "How long has he had this?" And he said, "From childhood.

[22] And it has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you can do anything, have pity on us and help us."

[23] And Jesus said to him, "If you can! All things are possible to him who believes."

[24] Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!"

[25] And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You dumb and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again."

[26] And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse; so that most of them said, "He is dead."

[27] But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose.

[28] And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?"

[29] And he said to them, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."