Second Sunday of Lent, Cycle B

Old St. Pat’s, 2021

It is not unusual to have the Sunday lectionary provide us

With some gospel story about Jesus in action

Be that moving into the desert

To struggle with his own demons

Or ascending a mountain

To commune with the prophets.

What is less common, however,

Is an accompanying first reading

That also relates some notable tale.

More often than not, the first reading

offers a prophetic text or ancient wisdom

bolstering some key point in the Gospel.

For two weeks in a row, however,

We are treated to compelling stories

From the Old Testament.

Last week that came to us as the closing segment

of the story of the great deluge

With God establishing a new covenant

With Noah and his descendants.

This week, we are again immersed in Genesis

And offered another covenant story

In which God reconfirms his promises to Abraham

To bless him abundantly

And raise up from him innumerable descendants.

In all honesty I find these stories

Quite disturbing.

Last week, scripture recounted how

The creator who breathed his own life into Adam and Eve

choosing to erase virtually all evidence

of his first attempt to shape a human race

in the divine image.

For me, this is not a comforting image of a benevolent God

Who in next week’s first reading

Will command all to worship and love him

While threatening those who do not appease

His admitted divine jealousy.

How do we love a God who not only has the capacity

To eradicate the human race at will,

But according to sacred revelation

has actually almost done the deed?

Then there is this week’s heartrending story

That comes to us in a highly edited version.

Earlier in Genesis, when God first called Abraham

And promised to raise his descendants into a great nation

The patriarch was already 75 years old and childless.

As was the custom in those days

His barren wife gave her slave-girl, Hagar, to Abraham

And Hagar conceived his first son, Ismael.

When Sarah eventually did conceive Isaac

She was very old and Abraham was already 100 years old.

But Sarah was jealous of Ishmael

And Abraham eventually dispatches his first born

With his slave-girl mother

Into the wilderness.

So as we approach today’s story

It comes with the weight of Abraham’s & Sarah’s age

The fact that Abraham has already pushed out his first born

And now God wants him to sacrifice Isaac

The lynchpin of the promised innumerable descendants.

The ordinary approach for preaching on this distressing text

Is to focus on the amazing faith and steadfastness of Abraham

Whom God keeps promising a glorious future

A nation rising from his offspring

While the same God appears to keep jeopardizing that promise

With the dismissal of Ishmael

And the impending sacrifice of Isaac.

The exact nature of Abraham’s faith is unclear.

At one point in the story

He tells the servants who accompanied him and the boy

To stay while he and his son go off to sacrifice

Noting that “we will worship and come back to you.”

Did he expect God to resurrect the child after his death?

And what about Isaac.

He is no infant here for he carries the wood up the mountain

He was old enough to resist but why didn’t he?

Is this really a story about his faith as well?

While it might seem a little odd, maybe even self-serving

For me to use this preaching moment

To try to make sense of this reading

For my own sanity and spirituality

Pope Francis seems to suggest that this is ok.

No, he didn’t send me an email approving my homily

But in his first great instruction about preaching

The pope actually encourages homilists to ask questions like:

What does this text say to me

What is it about this word that moves me, and

What troubles me about this text?[[1]](#endnote-1)

Well what troubles me is an apparent definition of faith

As blind obedience

To what could appear to be a jealous even vengeful God.

For my spiritual well-being I need another message here.

One way out of this dilemma is by reimaging this Genesis tale

not as an ancient commentary on faith

but rather a wisdom teaching about sacrifice.

This so-called sacrifice of Abraham

Is acknowledge by Jewish scholars as the most perfect sacrifice

In the Hebrew Scriptures.

Yet, ironically, it is a sacrifice without destruction.

God is not appeased by death

But as the Psalmist notes, by a contrite heart (51:17).

One could even suggest that this tale

Is an anti-sacrificial one

a moral injunction against killing

Especially against the killing of children

A practice the Hebrew scriptures themselves document.[[2]](#endnote-2)

But maybe there is even more in this perplexing text

that can lead us to a deeper meaning of Lent

And shed light on Jesus’ own transfiguration.

Scape-goating is a practice employed by folk

As a strategy for addressing sin, rivalry and violence.

In the bible a scapegoat was literally a young goat

Upon whom the people symbolically casts their sins

And then dispatched the goat into the wilderness

To carry away the community’s transgressions and guilt.[[3]](#endnote-3)

More generally, in contemporary theory

Scapegoating is a social mechanism we employ

To deflect some blame

Especially one that endangers the stability of a group

By placing it at the feet of some designated troublemaker.

By banishing or socially erasing,

Imprisoning or even executing that individual,

Social order is restored

And a community settles back into contentment

Believing that they have eradicated the problem

By eliminating the offending individual

regardless of whether they are actually guilty of anything.

Our criminal justice system regularly scapegoats the innocent

So that someone can be blamed and incarcerated

And the offended segments of society appeased.

More generally, scapegoating is a common political tactic

And whether it is the failure of the power grid in Texas

Or failure of the security at the Capitol building in DC

Finding someone to blame,

Rather than discovering and fixing the root cause

Is a favorite past time.

Now you might be asking yourself

What this digression into sacrifice and scapegoating

Has to do with a gospel about Jesus’ transfiguration

Or even the Lenten journey that lies before us.

For me the connections are clear and multiple.

First, Jesus is not some unknowing or unwilling victim

Duped into sacrifice …

Rather, he is wise in the ways of God and the ways of the world.

He knows that he is being set up as a scapegoat

To divert heat away from Jewish and Roman authorities.

He even recognizes subversion among his closest followers

And yet willingly enters into the circle of death.

But even more, in his willingness to take on the sin

To take on the prejudice and derision and animosity

Ordinarily heaped upon the outcasts and powerless

Jesus breaks the cycle of violence

For he chooses to pass it on to no one.

The crucifixion, in all of its ghastly horror,

was God’s rejection of sacrificing or scapegoating others.

Jesus’ transfiguring gift, therefore,

Was not simply a singular conversation

With law Moses and Elijah.

Rather, it was rather a prophetic transfiguring

Of the commandments themselves

Transforming duty to care

Obligation to commitment

And legal requirements to love.

In the process, disciples are called to a similar transformation

That does not allow us to leverage privilege or piety

In order to sacrifice or scapegoat others.

Rather, in the image of the paschal lamb,

We are commissioned

to absorb the violence and destruction and prejudice

Without passing it on to others.

There are no more Isaacs in our midst,

No more unknowing victims to scapegoat

But only God’s beloved to uphold and embrace.

There is a striking memorial in Haman-gun in South Korea

Dedicated to the Protestant saint Son Yang-won.[[4]](#endnote-4)

He was a remarkable Christian in many ways:

Ministering to lepers

Refusing to abandon his religion

During the Japanese occupation

And imprisoned as an enemy of the empire.

An apostle of reconciliation

he led a movement to reconcile other pastors

who had submitted to Shinto worship

During that same occupation.

The most amazing story about him, however, concerns

The killing of his own sons by communist sympathizers in 1948

For defending each other and their Christian faith.

When the murderer of his sons came up for trial

He sent word through a surviving daughter

That he did not want the boy, Chai-Sun

To be prosecuted or punished.

Instead, he adopted the murderer of his children

Taught him of Christ

And this new son became a Christian minister.

In 1950, in the midst of the Korean war,

Pastor Son refused to abandon his flock in the north

Was eventually arrested by the communist army

And on September 27, 1950 was executed for his faith.

A few weeks later, a procession took his body

To its final resting place on a small island

Where he was buried next to his murdered children.

Leading the procession, as oldest son and chief mourner,

Was Chai-son

Atheist transfigured into Christian

Murderer transfigured into minister

And criminal transfigured into a beloved son.

**Music**

The voice from the skies in today’s gospel

Proclaims the belovedness of God’s only son

A belovedness that may seem totally beyond our frail natures.

But as Pastor Son made clear

There is parental pride not only in children

Who sacrifice their own lives for Christ

But also pride in a son who turned from his own instincts

For scapegoating and sacrificing others

To become a beloved child

birthed of reconciliation and love.

We pray that in this holy season

We too might be likewise transfigured

To a way of life

That is only self-sacrificing

never scape-goating of any sister or brother

And so more clearly reveal our own belovedness.

In this transfiguring journey we pray

that our Eternal parent might be even more

Proud of those of us who profess to be

Children of the font … children of the Light…

Even more proud of these daughters

Proud of these sons

Through Christ our Lord.

1. Joy of the Gospel, no. 153 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. E.g., Judges 11:30-9, Leviticus 18:21 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Leviticus 16:21-22 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Park Hyun-jung, *White Flame: The Story of Rev. son Yang-won,* trans. Kim Myungjun. Kindle Edition. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)