

Due to technical difficulties, there is no audio version available for this sermon. We apologize for any inconvenience this may cause.

## THE END OF SACRIFICE

**Genesis 22:1-14**

**The 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 8)**

**June 29, 2014**

**All Saints', Atlanta, Georgia**

One hundred years ago yesterday—June 28, 1914—The Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo and one month later the first shots were fired in what was to become one of the bloodiest wars of all time. I remember my grandfather had a pronounced limp which I understood as a result of the wounds he received in the trenches and which hospitalized him for nearly a year. He was considered 'lucky'. In spite of reading a number of histories of this war, I have never really understood how it came about and why so many peoples and nations were caught up in the conflict. But now Margaret MacMillan has written *The War That Ended Peace: The Road to 1914*. It is a fabulous book recounting any number of social and political factors that swirled around in the European stew of those years. She looks at the advent of modernism, the arts, technological advances which were to prove so deadly and so on; but also recognizes the "persistence and force of older ways of thinking and being." She writes:

“Millions of Europeans, for example, still lived in the same rural communities and in the same manner as their ancestors, Hierarchy and knowing one’s place in it, respect for authority, belief in God, still shaped the way in which Europeans moved through their lives. Indeed, without the persistence of such values, it is hard to imagine how so many Europeans can have gone off willingly to war in 1914.”<sup>1</sup> She looks at attitudes to the military, to dueling, to peace and much else besides, even as she looks at major figures, shifting alliances, and even social Darwinism that assumed that there would always be wars. It is a great book, and in some ways it is a book about how cultural norms and a particular imaginative universe could allow such mass insanity to occur.

In a way it was just such an imaginative world that Abraham inhabited, --one in which child sacrifice for the purposes of propitiating angry gods was considered ‘normal’ and taken for granted. The story of Abraham’s almost sacrifice of Isaac is horrible and disgusting, especially when used by some Christians to admire his unblinking trust in God. More than that, I find it disgusting when it somehow becomes a type or image of God’s willingness to sacrifice his own son on the cross. No, a god who would do such a thing is not worthy of worship. This story is *not* about Abraham’s absolute fidelity, --his absolute trust in God—such that he would be prepared to sacrifice his son for no

---

<sup>1</sup> Margaret MacMillan, *The War That Ended Peace* (Random House, 2013) p.247

apparent purpose except to demonstrate his fidelity. I find that disgusting and hope that if you think about it, you do as well.

This story *is* about Abraham's fidelity, however, in his being willing to imagine something different, something new, something extraordinary, --the end of child sacrifice and the end of the idea that violence against others solves anything for anyone. I have recently learned that the word for God early in his story is *Elohim*, a plural word reflecting an older idea of many gods, and exactly the kind of gods that appeared to demand that people kill their own children. By the end of the story it is *Yahweh* with whom Abraham is talking, the Holy One, the One who over centuries would transcend national God's and come to be seen as God of the whole of creation. What is reflected in this story of Abraham and Isaac is the reality that our own understandings of God, and so what is right and wrong, 'normal' and 'beyond the pale' grow and change and develop even over the course of our own lifetimes. This story reflects a time when child sacrifice was a normal part of reality for many, and how someone had the imagination to re-think their theology, --their idea of God,-- and refuse to use God to justify a vile practice.

I was drawn into a conversation recently with a man who is afraid that he is losing his faith, that somehow all this God stuff seems irrelevant to his life and that when he does find himself able to believe he has to do so in spite of all the terrible, horrible things that seem to be going on in his life and the lives of those he loves. He is not convinced by my supposition that what is really going on is that his own understanding of God is shifting and that new possibilities are emerging for him. I don't know whether he will end up with the grace of a new understanding or conceptual idea of God or whether he will reject the whole enterprise and try and imagine that religion is merely self-delusion. Or maybe he will try becoming Spiritual but not Religious. I really don't know. I know that many of my friends from my teenaged evangelical years drew the conclusion that they had been hoodwinked or at least mistaken once they started rejecting the kind of God who would demand the death of his own Son. I was granted something rather different, --a new way of thinking about God as I was drawn into the life of a vibrant large parish community. Over time I have even moved from rejecting any idea of sacrifice whatsoever, to understanding that Sacrifice is costly *self*-offering, that it is about putting our trust in God for life, and that it is the same as finding that we are most fully who we were created to be when we are generous beyond measure in love for another. Giving ourselves away, sacrificially even, is a clue to entering real and abundant life. Like Abraham, we can --and probably must over the course of a lifetime--

re-imagine this God who might have seemed so immediate, so immanent to us as children and who now we find ourselves engaging as we gather around the table for bread and wine.

And as we reflect the tradition of our faith and allow development in our own relationship with the Divine, so we might also keep trying to imagine a world in which we no longer sacrifice children by sending them marching off to absurd wars, or a world in which we no longer sacrifice children by killing them with drones or by calling the killing of prisoners in the name of the state a matter of justice and on and on and on. I'm sure you can make your own list. The end of violence and the beginning of real peace begins with each of us allowing ourselves to imagine the unimaginable. If we can imagine that two men attracted to each other and in love with each other could in fact enjoy the blessings of marriage and that they are not sick or sinful or beyond the pale, then could we also not imagine a world in which we don't have to accept ideas that violence solves anything or makes us safer. And could we not imagine such a vision shaping the way we talk and the way we vote and the ways in which we manage our own tendencies to violence when we are abused or bullied or put down or even just cut off in traffic?

I know that I have a long way to go in my own Spirit. I find it hard to imagine myself engaging in a kind of personal unilateral disarmament. Even so, the story of Abraham and Isaac gives me hope that we do not need to have another stupid war, and that we can be drawn by God into a new vision of the world and of ourselves, --a new vision of sacrifice as self-giving love and self-giving love as the Way of Life.

Let us respond to the gospel, as is our custom, first in silence and in prayer...