

Genesis 22:1-14

## The Sacrifice

In Illinois, just north of St. Louis, there is a place where the Mississippi River runs west to east for about 15 miles, in-between the confluence of the Illinois and Missouri Rivers. On the north side of the river is a bluff that rises between 60 and 100 feet high, and is sometimes a sheer, rock-face cliff.

When the first European came down the Illinois into the region sometime in the 1600s, it was Pere Jacques Marquette, he wrote in his journal that there was a large painting of a bird-like beast on the face of the cliff near what is now Alton, Illinois. As a matter of fact there was two of them. It turns out there was a story among the native tribes about that beast, which was known as the “Piasa,” or “flesh-eating” bird.

In the story, the bird lived in a cave along the bluff and would come out and capture a warrior to devour. A chief named Ouatoga prayed and it was revealed to him that the armor of the beast did not protect it under the wings, so he came up with a plan. He and six warriors went to the top of the bluff.

While the others hid, he made himself visible so the beast would come and try to capture him. He held to the roots while the bird tried to carry him away and the

six warriors pierced its underwings with poisoned arrows, killing the bird and putting an end to the terror.

## Isaac

One of the more disturbing biblical texts is the one we have read in this service today. Abraham has been promised that he will become the “father of great nation, which will become a blessing to the world.” Even though at the time he had no children, he pulled up stakes and left his homeland to be a foreigner in a strange land because he had believed the promise.

Finally, after many trials and adventures, a child was born to him and his wife Sarah in their old age. With the birth of Isaac it looked as though the promise would be kept and there would be descendants after all.

Then this forbidding demand was imposed on Abraham. He was asked to offer his son Isaac, the child of the promise, as a human sacrifice. And he almost went through with it. Though the text itself does not describe his emotions, one can imagine great distress and turmoil as he prepared the altar, bound his son to it, and made the knife ready.

At this point it should be clear that this sort of thing is so repulsive that we would not even consider it.

Cultural practices 4,000 years ago were different than in our time. This practice was not unheard of, at least there is some indication that it was practiced by the people in Abraham's time and place. One gets the impression that these stories, the one about the Piasa and the one about Isaac, were used to justify an end to the practice of human sacrifice.

Because we have lived so long in the time after human sacrifice as a religious rite has been unequivocally condemned, it is hard for us to relate to Abraham's willingness to obey. Nonetheless, Abraham was willing to obey. The altar was prepared, the boy was bound, the knife was ready.

### Human Sacrifices

Let us not be dishonest about our participation in human sacrifice. We are appalled at "religious" ceremonies that involve this detestable practice. That any people ever thought of such practices defies explanation. We are more sophisticated in our ways of sacrificing people.

War is a human sacrifice. From time-to-time people and nations stumble into wars. We don't seem able to avoid them.

Poverty is a human sacrifice. In all human history there has never been a completely just economic system that was poverty free. There are always some left-outs. There is enough for everyone but we accept poverty, and it kills through malnutrition, unsanitary conditions, crime, lives cut short.

Discrimination is a human sacrifice. Racism, sexism, all those ugly names we call one another. They are human sacrifices. We should be honest about them.

I do not mean for anyone to have to defend political convictions, whatever solutions one might think would alleviate problems. I only hope to help us see the tragedy that is constantly played out before us; to help make more clear our hardheartedness and unwillingness to change, or to sacrifice something ourselves, security, affluence, something; to make things better; to help see that our inability to figure out justice . . . is a sophisticated human sacrifice. We could at least own that much.

### God's Sacrifice

The great biblical parallel to this Abrahamic story, is the story of Jesus. We are reminded of his pleas in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before the crucifixion, "It be your will, remove this cup from me." In the words of Frederick Buechner, "the cup was not

removed, presumably because the Father was not willing to remove it. And the unwillingness of the Father to remove the cup was harder to choke down than the cup itself was.” Maybe he was right.

Nevertheless, God did not spare his own son, as in the end Isaac was spared, and God’s sacrifice stands before us as the greatest act of unconditional love and most meaningful event in human history.

### The Test

Once it was clear that Abraham was willing to go through with the murder of his son Isaac, God called the whole thing off, and re-affirmed to Abraham the promise earlier made. God never intended the practice of human or child sacrifice. In the 106th Psalm, the practice is condemned, as it is also in Jeremiah 7, where we find these lines,

“The people of Judah have done evil in my eyes, declares the Lord. They have set up detestable idols in the house that bears my name and have defiled it. They have built the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire - something I did not command, nor did it enter my mind.”

This story is not about human sacrifice, we must look for another truth. This story reveals an important aspect of God’s character; that God has displayed unconditional love towards people, and desires it in return.

### Deeper truth

Like Abraham, we benefit from our relationship with God. We are forgiven our sins, given meaningful lives, and promised heaven. In all our relations there is a mutual transaction; we give of ourselves, and we receive of those who give of themselves to us.

The notion of unconditional love forces us beyond this transaction. The test is this: does Abraham love God because of what he has been promised? Or does he just love God?

And this test applies to us. Are we in this because of what we stand to gain? Or are we just in it because we love? What if there is nothing to gain? How far does faith go?

I am reminded of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego before they were thrown in the fiery furnace: “Our God is able to deliver us . . . but if not, be it known to you, O King, that we will not bow down to the image that you have set up.”

Can we embrace the, “but if not?”

When we start out in faith, there is a clear attraction to what we have been promised. Before our time is up, however, we are challenged by the Great Command to love God with all our being unconditionally, expecting nothing, only to love and be loved without condition. This kind of love is rare in any relationship, and in the end it is not required of us, only given to us, like when Ouatoga put his life on the line for his people, like when Jesus put his on the line for us.

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