

Genesis 22:1-14, Psalm 13, Romans 6:12-23. Matthew 10:40-42

“And Abraham said, ‘God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.’ So the two of them walked on together.”

This is a hard story. A shocking and agonizing story. The story often called “The Binding of Isaac.” Or in some Bibles, “the command to sacrifice Isaac.” Sometimes, too, I have heard this story called “the sacrifice of Isaac,” although of course and crucially, though Abraham in terrible agony offers his son to God, God cries out from heaven to intervene and saves Isaac’s life.

As I read this story over and over and over this week, I was struck by the midpoint of this drama, at verse 8, when after Isaac has asked where the lamb they will sacrifice is, Abraham says, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.”

“God will provide the lamb.” What a great many things this might mean. The first thing that jumped to my mind, having heard this story many times, is the lamb that is found on the top of Mount Moriah. The ram, with its horns caught in the thicket. The lamb that is an answer to a prayer in the nick of time – a sacrifice that can take the place of Isaac.

But of course, that may not have been at all what Abraham was thinking of when he said “God will provide the lamb.” Because Abraham knew what God had asked of him. And so it seems that Abraham would have been thinking of his own son, of Isaac himself, who had been provided to Abraham and Sarah by God, a gift long past the point when they had stopped expecting the blessing of a child of their own.

“God will provide the lamb,” Abraham tells his beloved son. This moment was not what he would ever have imagined when he was first told that God would provide him and Sarah with a son.

So what a relief when that ram appears. When God cries out from heaven in love and mercy and an urgent desire to stay Abraham’s hand. When there is a different sacrifice that can be offered, to take the place of Isaac.

And yet I confess that the verse about the ram also makes me sad. The “ram, caught in a thicket by its horns.” It seems so helpless. Such an unlucky, innocent bystander to this story. I feel sorry for it. And in it I see the cost of this sacrifice. A human child is spared, but another living thing dies.

All sacrifice is costly. That is what I see at the heart of this story. That is the heavy weight behind the words “God will provide the lamb for the burnt offering.”

The whole sacrifice system of the Old Testament may seem deeply foreign to us, and perhaps rather incomprehensible. Temple worship in a time of animal sacrifice was so profoundly different from our own, cleaner, experience of worship here in this place, that it may seem like a different phenomenon entirely.

But the sacrificial system we find in Holy Scripture is a sign to us.

It is a sign of something deep and costly in the relationship between God and humanity.

It is a sign of mutuality – of how God gives us every gift we have, including life itself, and so we give back to God costly and valuable and precious gifts - including life itself.

There were many types of gifts in Temple worship – thanksgiving offerings, sin offerings. These costly gifts showed the seriousness of sin. They also, almost paradoxically, were signs of the value of life.

The sacrifice system pointed to the insight that only the offering of something as precious and beautiful and valuable as life itself could express the vastness of our gratitude to God for life and for all the blessings He gives us.

The sacrifice system also expressed the conviction that only something as precious and beautiful and valuable as life itself could express the depth of our sorrow for wrongdoing - could express our realization that turning away from God though sin amounts to a rejection of the life God has blessed us with when we reject the good purposes for which God put us on this earth.

And so the ancient Israelites showed they recognized the seriousness and the cost of sin by offering a life back to God in the place of their own lives. Sacrifice was a sign of remorse, of wanting to turn back to God, and of wanting to give their own lives back to God - through the sign of the animal, and by turning their feet back into God's path for them.

Foreign though it may seem, this idea of offering is not entirely different from our own worship today. Look to the words of Eucharistic Prayer I on page 336, or listen for them in a few minutes as we pray them this morning. As we consecrate the bread and wine – the offering that becomes the Body and Blood of Christ, we say “here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee.”

We still offer life to God. We offer our own lives, which we consecrate and dedicate to God as His followers, as disciples of Jesus Christ - God in human flesh.

And here we find another meaning, another truth hidden deep within the words of Abraham – the words “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering.”

A lamb provided by God himself. A lamb of God. That is also the title John the Baptist used to identify Jesus. This title was shocking, too. To the ears of people living in a time that did still practice animal sacrifice “the lamb of God” would have immediately made them think of temple sacrifices – of lambs given to God.

Since the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Christians have consistently recognized the language of the story of Christ in the story of the binding of Isaac. Our ears hear echoes of the Gospel when we hear of a lamb from God. Of a father's beloved son. Non-Christian rabbis in the first century AD even commented on the way that Isaac carrying the wood for the altar of sacrifice resembled the way that Roman prisoners carried their crosses before crucifixion.

We call it a “type” when a story we find in Scripture tells not only its own story, but also points us toward something else – another story, another truth. The story of the binding of Isaac tells the story of Abraham and Isaac and the challenge and sacrifice they discovered as they sought to follow God. And the story also tells us Christians of our own story - the story of Jesus and his offering of himself – of his own life.

Jesus offered his own life to God. He gave up his life in trust and love for the Father. In faith that God the Father would raise him and give him life again. Jesus offered himself because he recognized the seriousness of human sin. He offered his life because it was a costly and valuable and precious gift from a human to God as a sign of love – an offer of reconciliation.

As a human and as God, Jesus offered his own life as the ultimate act of love – toward God and toward humanity. He offered himself to re-establish and heal the broken trust between humanity and God which has come into the world through sin. He lived life as God calls humans to live – without sin – and then he laid down his life anyway. As a human, he did this as a sign of love and trust toward God. And as God, he did this as an offer of love and reconciliation to humanity.

And because we receive this gift of reconciliation, because we have found peace with God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the story of Jesus' self-offering is our story.

And as we join in the Holy Eucharist, we join in that offering of Jesus. We offer ourselves as well. And we can do this because we are joined to Jesus. Because we are the Body of Christ. We are spiritually united to him in baptism, and his offering of his life becomes our self-offering as well.

His love and trust in the Father can become our love and trust as well. His faithfulness becomes our faithfulness, his life becomes our life, and his peace becomes our peace. We give ourselves to God in baptism. We become the Body of Christ and are “marked as Christ’s own forever.”

And we offer ourselves again at each Eucharist. We offer ourselves, our souls and bodies. We offer ourselves when we offer to God the consecrated bread and wine – the Body and Blood of Christ – because we are the Body of Christ. And so as you hear the celebrant say “The Gifts of God for the People of God” and you look and behold the Lamb of God – behold what you are – the Body of Christ. And offer yourselves to God once more.