

Now don't get me wrong. Chris was a real friend. But perhaps more than any person I have ever encountered, Chris would always say exactly what was on her mind, no matter how outlandish it may be, no matter who it might offend. I was always petrified when I brought a new customer to the office that they might start a casual conversation with Chris. More than a few times, I was forced to extricate the company from an embarrassing situation after Chris had offended someone's sensibilities. It got to the point that I tried to wait for Chris to be at lunch or sequestered in the photo darkroom before I would take someone on a tour. It was much safer that way.

That's why it did not faze me in the least the day that Chris walked up to me and said, "Keplinger, will you go look at yourself in the mirror? You've got dirt all over your forehead. It looks like you've just returned from some damn secret religious ritual." "Uh, Chris," I began, "the fact is, I did just return from a damn religious ritual. It's called Ash Wednesday and this mark is a reminder that all of us are going to die." "Holy bleep," said Chris. "You're yanking my chain, right? You're not kidding? Is it any wonder I wouldn't be caught dead in a church?" Then, she added incredulously, "What are you doing next week, sacrificing virgins?"

She was only half kidding. In fact, Chris almost believed me when I responded, "Well, as a matter of fact we are. Would you like to come join us? You aren't in any danger of being sacrificed, are you?" There's not much factual information people like Chris actually know about organized religion. But even she was familiar with the story we just heard in today's first lesson. And if one of the few things you know about

three of the world's major religions is this profoundly disturbing tale of what sounds like a sadistic God telling the father of these religions to sacrifice his own child, is it any wonder that you would conclude, like my friend Chris, that all religion is a load of crap?

For centuries and centuries, pastors, theologians, and other divinity types have done their utmost to justify this story. They have taken every imaginable route above, under and through this text to try to prove to us that this tale that gives our children nightmares, and convinces many that Islam, Christianity and Judaism are all barbaric, is not really a horrifying narrative at all. Virtually all of those attempts have ended in dismal failure.

That's why the only logical thing for a preacher to do this morning is to run as fast as possible from today's first reading. Here at St. David's, that makes even more sense. As a church who totally and completely lives into the radical hospitality message found in today's Gospel, it only makes sense that we concentrate on that message, right? After all, Matthew's narrative about extravagant welcome and care for all is a Gospel all of you have lived into as well as any I've ever seen. But of course, that is all the more reason why I must throw myself under the lectionary bus this morning and preach on the Hebrew text. The other reason, of course, is that many of you would yell, "chicken!" or something worse, if I did not.

Perhaps for some, today's hospitality Gospel is just as challenging as the story of Abraham and Isaac. But there is no question where the challenge lies for you and me. We need to come to terms with this whole idea of sacrifice and what we do with a story that suggests that God might demand such sacrifice. Last week we talked about how we

should deal with the fact that biblical characters often behave very badly. Today, we have an even more difficult theological conundrum. How do we handle the notion that our God behaves badly?

If we are to have any hope in salvaging meaning from this distressing story, it is critical that we begin by putting it in historical context. We start with the realization that the part of this story that makes us sick at the stomach, the ritual sacrifice of children, would not have been a heart stopper for early hearers of this tale. In the early days of the clans that would become the Hebrews, the sacrifice of children for religious purposes was a reality. The fact that the law of Moses would specifically prohibit the offering of children as sacrifices is direct evidence that the issue did exist and was occurring. The story of the sacrifice of Isaac would have been part of the collection of stories told from generation to generation to teach Hebrew people about their culture and religion, not unlike the way the Navajo continue to tell their stories to the children. Rather than shock those hearing it though, what this story almost assuredly did was offer an explanation as to why their neighbors sacrifice their children, but we do not. We get a glimpse into the reason this story was told when we sit in on the Passover meal with our Jewish friends here each year. The question that our children ask that night is “Why is this night different from all other nights?” In the same way, the question a child might ask before hearing the tale of Abraham and Isaac might have been, “Why will you never sacrifice us like our neighbors do with some of their children?” So while *we* hear the tale as a barbaric God asking a father to do the worst imaginable thing, the early hearers would have interpreted it in nearly the opposite way, hearing God as the

compassionate One who would not allow us to do such a thing like the neighbor's gods.

This reminds us of something else critically important about the historical context of this story. Everyone, including Sara and Abraham and the early Hebrews, were polytheistic. There were gods for every country, for every situation, for every emotion, and every occurrence. All of those “-ite” people that surrounded Abraham's tiny clan, you know, the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Amelekites, and the Termites... are telling stories about the god of the thunder, and the god of the sea, the god of wrath, and the god of compassion, the god of jealousy, and the god of love. This story is much like the ones told by the -ite people. This becomes much clearer when you read the story in Hebrew. When God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son, God is referred to as Elohim. We interpret Elohim in our text as “God.” But when the story turns and Isaac is spared, it is Yahweh who comes to the rescue. We interpret Yahweh in our text as “The Lord.” Elohim is the term Jewish people will come to use for the God they experienced as distant and impersonal, the God who was looking at them from a distance. But at the same time they experienced a very personal God who was right there with them. They referred to this experience of God as Yahweh, the one who was with them on their trek across the desert.

What I hear in the story of Isaac and Abraham are the very early thought processes behind a new theology the world had never experienced before. It sounds to me as if the Hebrew people are struggling to articulate the notion that Elohim and Yahweh are not different gods at all. Maybe it is not that all of the -ites have their gods and we have Yahweh. Maybe Elohim and Yahweh are different aspects of the same god.

The God of Sarah and Abraham, the storytellers seem to be saying, had all the dimensions of all of your gods put together. It is a God who can simultaneously be demanding and compassionate.

Something seems to happen to Abraham in the middle of this tale to cause him to realize this difference. What he heard today as God's will sounded nothing like the personal God he had come to know as Yahweh. But he recognizes that this new voice was still coming from God. I believe the story of Abraham and Isaac is a story of evolving faith. It is the story of Abraham moving from polytheism to monotheism. And of course this is not just about Abraham. It is the symbol of what is happening within Judaism itself. In all the earlier Biblical texts, the Hebrews describe their God as better than the gods of the people surrounding them. But now, their understanding has changed. It's not just that ours is better, they say, it's that the God we have experienced is the only God.

What becomes blatantly obvious from this story is that the biblical understanding of God is CHANGING. God doesn't change, but the Hebrews understanding of God does. What this story makes clear is that the Bible is not and cannot be a book of eternal, unchanging beliefs. It is in fact, nearly the opposite. It is a book of constantly changing and evolving beliefs as human understanding matures.

When we come to the realization from the first lesson that the Bible is not an eternal document, but is about changing faith, we finally have an answer for people like Chris who think we are still like Abraham. The whole text of the bible opens up to us and we can begin to make sense of the parts that appear so troublesome. This tale tells

us why Hebrews stopped sacrificing their children, but instead substituted the sacrifice of an animal.

Later in the tradition, as the Hebrews understanding of God continues to evolve, sacrifice would be eliminated entirely as a way to please God. This becomes obvious by the time of the prophets Micah and Amos. Amos quotes God as saying, “Even though you offer me your burnt offerings...I will not accept them, and the offerings of well being for your fatted animals, I will not look upon.”

Once again, biblical faith evolves. That’s why I tend to call Ray’s magnificent piece of art here a table rather than an altar. It is a reminder that we don’t sacrifice animals on it anymore because our faith has evolved past the faith of Abraham. When we continue to use language in our worship that refers to ancient practices we have long since rejected, we foster reactions to our faith like my friend Chris’s.

Now there have been some who have attempted to fix the Abraham and Isaac problem a different way. They make believe it doesn’t exist. As early as the second century, a guy named Marcion taught that Christianity should toss out the entire Hebrew Bible and use only the Christian testament. We hear his sentiment often today when people suggest that the God of the Hebrew Bible is a God of vengeance and wrath, a God who demands sacrifice, while the God of the Christian testament is a God of love and compassion.

Tell that to my friends Mike and Julie Dumas. All of you know Mike through this beautiful cross and our unbelievable fountains and baptismal font. Mike designed and made them all. But years ago, Mike and Julie had a terrible crisis of faith when their son

was killed in a rollover car accident on I-15. I will never forget to the day I die the Pastor who presided at their son's funeral, telling them and all of us that our God *does* demand sacrifice, sometimes the sacrifice of our own children. He told them that God demanded the sacrifice of his own son to atone for all of our sins and that God demanded the sacrifice of their son to atone for something he or they must have done wrong.

It is inaccurate and harmful to our Jewish friends to suggest that the God of the Hebrew bible is full of wrath and vengeance while the Christian Testament God is not. This understanding occurs when we fail to acknowledge that faith in our sacred text evolves. That's what we do when we, like that Pastor, see Jesus' death as a substitutionary sacrifice for our sins. Instead of seeing that we have all evolved beyond this understanding of God, we adopt the same barbaric theology that repulses us so much when we hear it in the story of Abraham and Isaac. If we detest it so much in this story, why in the world would we adopt it all over again in trying to explain Jesus's death? And that is exactly why people like Chris run as fast and as hard as they can away from our churches.

I am also reminded of this each time I am at Best Friends Animal Society. Though I feel honored to be referred to as Best Friends priest, the truth of the matter is that most people there still look at me with deep suspicion. They, like Chris, see me as a representative of a faith that has never completely let go of the idea of the scapegoat, the notion that it is okay to slaughter animals as a substitutionary atonement for the sins of humans.

All of this is why at St. David's, we have done our best to eliminate the blood atonement language from our liturgies. We are not always successful because the language remains so prevalent in our tradition. But that is why you have never heard here the fraction anthem; "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast." As Roman Catholic scholar Elizabeth Johnson said many years ago, the symbol of God functions. As long as we continue to use substitutionary atonement language to describe why Jesus died, the Chris's of this world will continue to think that we are secretly sacrificing virgins on a hidden altar somewhere.

This is the reason why today's sacrificial story remains so important in our tradition. It is a reminder that we rejected sacrificial theology a long time ago. It reminds us that our understanding of God must continue to evolve, just like it did for our Jewish ancestors. When our vision of God becomes stagnant and stuck in the past, so does our faith.

Let us thank God for fearless people like Chris, who couldn't give a hoot about offending us and don't pull punches when they tell us how they see our faith. It is by learning from people like Chris what others *really* think of us that allows us to see beyond our own language and tradition. Let us return the favor by making it clear to all of the Chris's we encounter, that our faith has nothing to do with sacrificing sons, animals or virgins and everything to do with "doing justice, and loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God." Amen.