

Behold The Lamb

Texts: Genesis 22: 1-18; John 1: 29-42a;

January 19, 2020

One of the most famous Latin poems is *Odi et amo* by Catullus. It goes like this:

Odi et amo. Quare id faciam fortasse requiris. Nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior.

Catullus is writing about his ex-girlfriend, and the poem goes like this in English:

"I hate you, and I love you. Maybe you'll ask why. I have no idea, but I feel it happening, and it's killing me."

That's a little bit the way I feel about our passage from Genesis this morning, about Abraham and Isaac.

Part of me absolutely hates this text. It seems like it's just a story of an out-of-control God demanding a child sacrifice as a test of obedience from one of that God's followers.

In that respect, it's an absolutely dreadful story. It sets God out to be a cruel and unfeeling tyrant who enjoys watching the minions squirm.

We're supposed to admire the man who would kill his own son in response to a command from God, when we all know that, if it were to happen today, we'd arrest that man and lock him up in the mental health system and never let him out for the safety of himself and of society.

And we're supposed to admire the God who relents at the last second and spares the child. How is that a great thing? If we read it like that, it's a tough passage.

On the other hand, the ancient church absolutely loved it. And having read their reasons why, I get that love.

They saw a foreshadowing of Jesus in it everywhere. God said to Abraham, "Take your son, your only son...", and immediately the ancient church heard echoes of the opening of John's gospel: God sent God's only begotten Son.

Abraham's only son. God's only son.

And then they read, "Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering, and laid it on his son, Isaac."

It practically leapt off the page at them. That's just like Jesus. Jesus carried the wood of the cross on his back, just as Isaac had to carry the wood for the sacrifice on his back!

Isaac asks about the lamb, and Abraham tells him that they don't need a lamb because God will provide the lamb.

"Yes!" said the ancient church, "that's exactly it! We don't need to continue with bringing our sacrifices in the temple. We don't need to continue with the old way, in which we brought everything that was necessary for our salvation. It's God who will provide the lamb that we need. In Jesus, God provides everything."

But in spite of Abraham knowing that God was going to provide everything for the salvation of Isaac, and in spite of saying exactly that to Isaac, Abraham *still* prepares to go ahead with the sacrifice of his own son. He doesn't notice the lamb caught in the thicket.

"Of course," said the early church, "the world hasn't noticed Jesus yet! It takes a messenger from God, the voice of the angel from heaven, for Abraham to notice the lamb, and it took a messenger from God, John the Baptist, to point to Jesus and say, 'Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.' Now we have to be like the angels, we have to be like John, and point the world to Jesus: behold, the lamb of God."

It's all so clear, the ancient church thought. Abraham offers his son, and God offers God's son. But Abraham didn't have to go through with it, because God loved him so much that God provided the lamb, just as God loves us so much that God has provided Jesus to be our lamb of sacrifice.

The ancient church thought that God had shown the way of Christ long ago, and they loved the story because of it, and I love the story because of that, too.

So I hate and I love this story. If we look at it a little more closely, I think we can see something in the original story that we might have missed at first.

My wife, Kate, the Math Ed prof, likes to point out that a test can do many things. It can help the teacher to generate a grade for the student, but more importantly, it can help the student to find out how much they've learned, and they can solidify that learning in their minds.

Maybe that's what's going on here. Perhaps the test is not so that God can find something out about Abraham, but so that Abraham can see how far he's come, and what he still needs to learn.

You see, Abraham is a man of faith, but sometimes a man of half faith. He leaves his homeland to go to a land God promised him, yes, but he doesn't trust God to provide for him in that land.

Twice on his journey, Abraham used Sarah to get kings and pharaohs to give him part of their wealth. He gave his own wife to other men, pretending to be her brother, in order to assure his own safety and to be rewarded with land and goods. That's halfway faith. And his halfway faith leads to pain and suffering for Sarah.

Abraham trusted God enough to leave his homeland, but felt he had to manipulate the process to make God's promises of a new land come true.

The same thing happened with the promise of a child. God had promised Abraham offspring as numerous as the stars. Abraham believed that God would provide him with offspring, but he thought he had to manipulate the situation when Sarah seemed childless.

Abraham had a child with Sarah's maidservant, Hagar. His faith wasn't complete. He thought he had to do something to make God's promises come true. The Jewish people believe they are the offspring of Abraham through Isaac, and the Arab peoples believe

they are the offspring of Abraham through Hagar's son, Ishmael. Abraham's halfway faith has led to a lot of pain and suffering for others.

Then in our chapter and the chapter before it, God strips away every hope Abraham can have of fulfilling God's promise of offspring on his own.

First, Ishmael, Hagar and Abraham's son, is sent away with his mother. They are now out of the picture.

Then God says to Abraham, "It is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you, not through Ishmael." Now the promise has been narrowed down, not just offspring from a child of Abraham's with *someone*, and not just offspring from a child of Abraham's with *Sarah*, but precisely to offspring from *this one and only* child, Isaac.

And now, here, in our story today, Abraham is having the last piece of his self-sufficiency taken away. If Isaac is dead, how will God's promise come true then?

The author of Hebrews 11 says that Abraham had to trust God's promise completely, so much so that Abraham was the first to understand that God is even able to raise someone from the dead, for if Abraham sacrifices Isaac, a resurrection is the only way that God could fulfill God's own promises.

The test is not for God's benefit, to find out about Abraham's faith. God already knows all about that. It's faith, but it's halfway faith.

Rather, the test is to bring Abraham to that final place where he recognizes that God's promises are completely in God's hands. He has to realize that there is no need to manipulate God, or fiddle with trying to make the promises come true on his own. He can leave that up to God.

And that is where Abraham ended up: he told Isaac that God would supply the lamb, and his faith was rewarded. He was ready to believe that God could raise the dead to fulfill God's promise, but God did him one better by supplying the lamb instead.

And so we are back to the ancient church's reading of the text: there is Christ right in the middle of it again, as Abraham is the first to believe that God can even raise someone from the dead in order to fulfill God's promises.

It is a difficult passage. I hate it and I love it. In the end, the point is to trust in God completely to fulfill God's promises. God will supply all we need, and has supplied all we need for eternal life in Jesus Christ, the lamb of God.

We don't need to bring anything to sacrifice, for it has all been provided for us by God. On the table in front of you is God's provision, for we have the bread and the wine, which is a commemoration of God's gift to us of God's only Son, the lamb of God. Let us share with whole-hearted faith in the *life* of Christ as we remember the death of Christ and the resurrection of Christ here at the table of Christ. Amen