

Saved from Sacrifice

sermon by *Leslie Fraser*

Gospel of Mark 1:9-15, First Sunday in Lent, Year B

Have you ever told a joke and totally missed the punch line? The whole point of the joke goes out the window. Or have you heard a story—a story brand new to you—and been transfixed, like a child hearing a tale of heroes and villains, wonder and awe for the first time? Now this story is bound to become a favorite, a story you'll want to hear over and over. You'll even fill in the words—"goodnight room," "goodnight moon," "goodnight chair," "goodnight children everywhere"—long before you're able to read. But this new story really *is* different—it has a completely different ending, a completely different meaning than the other stories you know by heart.

I think that's what the Lent, Passion, and Easter story has become for us. We know the story. But do we? We've heard it so many times, we could fill in the blanks. But could we? Jesus is baptized by John, declared "my Son, the Beloved" by the Holy Spirit, and driven into the wilderness by the Spirit for 40 days to wrestle with Satan, waited on by the angels, as today's gospel reading tells us. Jesus purifies himself. Then he comes back to join his homies in Galilee and spread God's good news; he heals people, performs miracles, and gets ready for the big spring festival of Pesach. He rides into Jerusalem on a donkey-colt. On Palm Sunday, we get to enter into the story, again, as if we're hearing it for the first time. We get to meet Jesus, again, *and* for the first time. We get to hear the joke—Did you hear the one about the god whose father let him get tortured and killed, just to prove that he could come back again? Oh, he looked a little different in his new body, nobody recognized him, but it was him alright—we get to hear that joke as if we don't know the punch line. As if we don't know there's going to be a resurrection; so that Jesus' betrayal, his giving over, is not the last word.

Every Holy Week, "we are asked to endure the story of the death of Jesus in living color, in gory detail, and... we are asked to walk with him and his disciples every step of the way—with no knowledge of Sunday, no knowledge of empty tombs or resurrections,

but only of gathering doom, and threatening weather, and the smell of death all around,” as Barbara Brown Taylor tells us. “We are asked to forget what we know and to follow our Lord to his wretched death without a clue what will happen next, because it is only then, when we have shared even a splinter of his cross, that he has anything more to offer us. It is our final Lenten discipline and it is hard, extremely hard.” (Barbara Brown Taylor, from sermon “Blood Kin,” in *Mixed Blessings*, Cowley Publications, 1998, page 58) But we do know what will happen next—the story is as familiar as the drive we make from our homes to this church, as the steps we take from our front door to our kitchen sink—and it is painful to see the steps Jesus takes on Holy Week with the eyes of someone seeing them for the first time.

And so we fly, in our minds, in our hearts, if we can, from Palm Sunday’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem: Jesus coming home to his people, into the heart of Israel—which means “God’s people”—to set them free from their oppression, enslaved to the Romans, to bind their wounds and heal their souls. We wave our palms like magic wands, and whoosh, fast forward, we rise with Christ on Easter morning, triumphant again.

Or we fixate on Isaiah’s suffering servant. We identify with the broken Christ. We bleed our own stigmata, glorifying the blood, the saving blood, the grisly blood, the blood of the lamb. The violently violated, tortured, terrified Jesus put up on a cross to die becomes our God. The violently violated. Rewind. The violent. Rewind. The violated and tortured. The tortured. Rewind. We get stuck in a very old story, a story of sacrifice, blood, and salvation that is thousands of years older than Christianity—a story so old that almost every ancient people, and almost every religion in the ancient world, tells it. This story is so old, it’s probably embedded in our genes, hardwired into our primeval, reptilian brain stem. So we think that this is the story that Jesus came to tell us, again; came to live out, again.

But if this is the story we hear and tell again—we’ve missed the punch line. Jesus came to save us *from* sacrifice. Not *through* sacrifice. And that’s the story I invite you to journey with this Lent. He came with good news—a brand new story. And we try to fill

in the blanks from the old story line—even the gospel writers whose stories made it into the new testament’s canon used the old story’s mythos.

And the early church’s patriarchs—lovers of empire, conquest, and conversion—told us it was the tortured death and blood of Jesus—not the life, not the infinite and eternal spirit of Christ, not the good, new story—that saves, salves, heals, and makes us whole, one with God. But remember, even in the old testament, God banned blood sacrifice—God told the wandering, wondering ancestors of Israel to stop offering sacrifices, that God was hurt, not honored, by vestal virgins, the decapitated head of an enemy, or even the substituted slaughtered bodies of sacrificial goats and lambs. No, in this new story, God did not ask for his son to be killed and offered up on a cross to appease Godself or make God whole—God did not tell us to torture another in order to unite us as one, to make “at-one-ment,” to atone for the sins of God’s people. That was the old story, and it was a fairy tale to begin with.

God sent Jesus of Nazareth to set us straight. No angry, fire throwing God high in the clouds, like Zeus hurling lightning bolts to destroy his people. That image of God was a projection of the people’s fears. They made up that God, because they thought their tough lives had to be the punishment of an angry daddy. *That* God was just the people’s nightmare. And living through hard times, starvation, exile, slavery, pain and suffering, you could see where that nightmare might come from.

But Jesus showed up with a ministry of love, with a commitment of love—he came to give us a new commandment. And what a gift, this new understanding—God’s commitment is to love us as we love God, as we love each other, as we love our neighbor—because we’re all made of the same stuff, part of the same family in Spirit, the same Godself.

So if we love God with all our hearts, we will love our neighbors as ourselves, because we know that our neighbor, made in God’s image, God’s spirit, is God’s child too—kin to us, our own blood relation. Why would we want to hurt God, ourselves, our own blood kin? Well, we’re still working on that commandment, aren’t we? Yet this covenant

with God, extends from Noah's rainbow—the story we heard in today's Hebrew scripture—to us: God will not destroy us—drown all life—because of human trespasses.

We can't change the Passion story—the horrible things that horribly hurt and fearful people did to Jesus during his Passover in Jerusalem. Yet Jesus suffered, not because his Abba willed that, but because very sin-full, fearful, error-full, violent, greedy, sleepy people betrayed him. They gave him away to their own fears and ignorance—that's how the Greek word for *betray* is translated: to give away. They gave in to fear. God didn't "will" that. We can't project our "evils" or misperceptions, or the bad things that people do, onto God. Jesus didn't die as a "punishment" because we are bad. And God's atonement, God's offering of at-one-ment and union with Godself, occurred in spite of Jesus' death. It happened at birth. Atonement is the gift of Jesus' life, his love, his divinity. It's our gift, too, if we'll take it. If we'll accept it.

Blood sacrifice is a notion totally alien, unknown, to God. It arises from fear, and from fear alone. And fearful people can be violent, harmful, and vicious. There is nothing divine or Godly in such sacrifice. There is no love or mercy in sacrifice. And God *is* love and mercy. The resurrection showed that nothing can destroy truth. As light can dispel any darkness, good can withstand any form of evil, because evil is untrue, a projection of fearful, hurtful minds. Atonement is its antidote—the unity of good, of God, in pure and everlasting blessing. (paraphrased from *A Course in Miracles*, p. 57-58)

"Listen, I will tell you a mystery!" wrote Paul, the transformed Pharisee who met the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus. "We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in the twinkling of an eye.... Then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.'" (1 Corinthians 15:51, 54)

May the living, loving peace of Christ be with you always, and light your journey through this season of Lent. If you encounter fears or challenges on this journey, if you enter dark nights or places that are wilderness to you—do not sacrifice your love, God's love. Let angels attend you. Listen for a new story. Be changed. —Leslie Fraser

For background on blood sacrifice in antiquity, see pages 36-38 in *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem*, by Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, HarperSanFrancisco, 2006.

For more on sacrificial violence and scapegoating in religion and history, and theologies of nonviolent atonement, see *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross*, by S. Mark Heim, Eerdmans Publishing, 2006.