

FEBRUARY 25TH, 2018: SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT
Genesis 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18 Romans 8:31b-34 Mark 9:2-10

Many regard today's second reading as Yahweh's cruelest biblical trick. How can any god command a father kill his son, then only tell him he was "kidding" just before he strikes the fatal blow? There must be more here than meets the eye. Why is such a narrative even in Scripture?

It's important to know this passage comes from the "Elohistic" source: an oral tradition written down in the Northern half of the Holy Land in the middle of the 8th century BCE. The authors of this particular source seem to have been prophets, disturbed by constant pagan pressures inflicted on their readers.

Many of these non-Jewish people actually sacrificed their children to the fertility gods and goddesses they worshiped, often taunting their Israelite neighbors that such atrocious practices proved they were more dedicated to their deities than the Israelites were dedicated to Yahweh. This is where the Elohistic author seems to step in.

This prophetic writer creates a story with which all his readers agree: if Yahweh were to actually demand they sacrifice their children, they would do so, no matter the cost. But the writer reinforces their belief in Yahweh as a God of life by reminding them they're to "redeem" any child they'd sacrifice with an animal. Today's narrative is the "official explanation" of that practice. In Abraham's case, Isaac is redeemed with a ram. (Remember, Joseph and Mary redeemed Jesus with some pigeons.)

In narrating this story, the Elohistic author is more interested in Abraham's dedication to Yahweh than in the psychological harm such a scenario can inflict on the participants. Though most of us today go beyond the writer's focus and zero in on other aspects of the narrative, as good "exegetes" we have to see the event through his eyes, not ours.

Abraham, as the first Jew, sets the example for all other Jews. He's depicted as someone totally loyal to Yahweh. The constant intent to do whatever Yahweh wants is what sets him and his descendants apart from all others. Certainly makes them "holy," deeply different from those around them.

Each of us is somehow changed by the relationships we form. Every time this happens we become a different person. Nowhere is this more the case than in our relationships with Yahweh and the risen Jesus. Abraham becomes the initial member of Yahweh's Chosen People; and all other Christs become the new creation their mentor has become.

It's important to keep the latter in mind when we hear today's transfiguration pericope. Not only is Jesus transfigured, Mark presumes everyone who imitates Jesus' dying and rising is also transfigured. It's possible the evangelist actually began his transfiguration narrative by first reflecting on what happened to him once he dedicated himself to following Jesus of Nazareth. If he's been transfigured in the imitation process, then Jesus also must have been transfigured when he began the process. The link can't be broken. What happens to Jesus happens to us, and vice versa.

Paul realizes our commitment to the risen Jesus is the most important aspect of our lives. He reminds the church in Rome that their unique relationship guarantees they'll experience a "fearless" life. "If God is for us," he writes, "who can be against us? . . . Who will bring a charge against God's chosen ones? It is God who acquits us." No one can do better.

The Elohistic writer, along with his fellow sacred authors, is convinced Yahweh is a God of life. But he's also convinced the only way to get the most out of life is to give ourselves over to Yahweh. It's by sacrificing ourselves to his/her will that we'll actually reach the depth of that life, no matter the cost.

MARCH 4TH, 2018: THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

Exodus 20:1-17 I Corinthians 1:22-25 John 2:13-25

I once asked a rabbi friend what he thought of the commotion over public displays of the Ten Commandments. He just smiled and answered as I thought he would. “Those commandments are our responsibilities,” he said, “not yours. But we Jews appreciate all the free publicity we’re getting.”

The commandments contained in today’s Exodus reading are part of the 613 covenant regulations the ancient Israelites agreed to on Mt. Sinai. If you’re Jewish, these laws are some of the responsibilities your ancestors swore to keep because of their relationship with Yahweh. Should you decide to be part of that 2,300 year old covenant, these 613 commandments are also your responsibilities, even today.

One of the biggest questions facing earliest Christians revolved around whether a non-Jewish convert to Jesus’s faith had to follow the Sinai covenant before he or she could be another Christ. In other words, did they have to be Jews before they could be Christians?

Paul of Tarsus answered “No!” to that question. He reminded his readers that Abraham – in Genesis 15:6 - had made a covenant with Yahweh at least 400 years before Moses entered into that more famous one on Mt. Sinai. That original covenant mentioned nothing about 613 regulations. It simply committed Abraham to “put his faith” in Yahweh, something Gentiles could do without actually becoming Jews. As long as they concurred with Abraham’s commitment, they were children of Abraham. The church could demand nothing more of them.

But as compelling as Paul’s argument, the question never went away during his lifetime. We need only read his letter to the Galatians in which he not only tells his “Judaizing” adversaries to be the first to be circumcised but also “prays the knife slips!” And, according to some scholars (like Garry Wills), his “liberal” answer to the Jew/Gentile question eventually leads to his martyrdom.

The Apostle is convinced the faith of Jesus adds something to Judaism, else his death and resurrection is meaningless. Jesus’ earthly ministry would have simply revolved around keeping those 613 laws, no more. That’s why he mentions his insight into the general Jewish rejection of the covenant Jesus lived and taught. As he reminds the Corinthians, it’s a “stumbling block” to many of the Chosen People. Jesus’ dying for others isn’t a sign of his strength. On the contrary, for them it’s a sign of his weakness. Yet in Paul’s experience, those willing to become weak by engaging in such self-giving will eventually achieve a life the Sinai participants could never attain by just keeping the Ten Commandments.

By the time John writes his gospel in the mid-90s, the split between Christianity and Judaism has become a huge gulf. The theme song running throughout the fourth gospel is “Anything You Can Do, I Can Do Better.” The “You” refers to Jews; the “I” to Christians. The evangelist’s first miracle, which precedes today’s pericope, initially demonstrates how the wine of Christianity replaces the water of Judaism.

Here John’s Jesus proclaims he’s replacing that great Jewish institution – the Jerusalem temple – with himself. Throughout the passage he speaks about “the temple of his body.”

John and Paul would have been amazed the classic double-tablet symbol of Israel’s covenant, the Ten Commandments, is so frequently displayed in Christian settings . . . even in churches. As my rabbi friend stated, “That’s not your covenant.”

Yet few Christians have any idea in what our covenant with Jesus consists; nor can we click off our responsibilities. Almost never have I seen symbols of that particular agreement.

Best we “hang in there” until Holy Thursday. Our covenant – and the outward symbol of it – will be front and center during that specific celebration. We need lots of publicity for it, though it’s anything but free.