

July 2, 2017
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 8, Year A, RCL
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

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



St. James' Episcopal Church up in Glastonbury has several beautiful and unique stained glass windows. One of them is particularly stunning. The window is tall and relatively narrow. Look up at it, and your eye gravitates naturally to the large central figure, a full-body image of a man dressed as a first-century Roman soldier. If you simply glance at the window, that's all you'll notice. But look closer, and your gaze is drawn downward by two much smaller figures beneath the soldier's feet. Those smaller figures are twentieth-century green-clad soldiers stepping cautiously forward. They're part of a detailed scene of modern war. In the background, another soldier seems to be guiding away a family with children. In the distance, an open parachute is falling. Once you take all that in, your eyes are drawn back up, to items just above that war scene: at left, a service medal; at right, an insignia. Your gaze continues up, back to the image of the Roman soldier. Noticing details that you missed before, you see that his arms are lifted slightly away from his body and his hands are open. He has just dropped his helmet and sword, which are frozen in mid-air. Above him, at the top of the window, a winged angel is captured at the moment just before he places a crown on the soldier's head.

The Church has a booklet of photos and descriptions of all the stained glass windows. About this one, it says: “This window is given in memory of Major William Roush, who was killed in Vietnam in 1968. A warrior is shown dropping all his weapons and receiving the Crown of Life. His work is done. A Vietnamese scene below is to show Major Roush’s role in the protection of refugees, and his medal shown here, the Legion of Merit, was awarded for that assistance. The emblem of the Special Forces ‘Green Berets’ is shown along with parachutes of his division of service. The cross in the apex is to signify his supreme sacrifice.”¹ Looking him up online, I learned that Roush also received high commendations for saving other soldiers in two separate firefights; he died from the wounds he sustained in the second one.² I’ll add that the window is designated the “St. Michael Window.” Apparently the crowning figure is St. Michael the Archangel, who is one of the patron saints of soldiers, and specifically the patron saint of paratroopers.

As I see it, that window memorializes William’s death by celebrating his ultimate glory; it both personalizes and universalizes William’s experience; all while acknowledging war without glorifying it. It’s a work of art, both beautiful and terribly sad. The Roush name is no longer among the parishioners at St. James’. I don’t know what happened to them.

We are now in the long summer of the first year of our three-year cycle of Bible readings. During this time, our Hebrew Scripture lessons are a sequential telling of the stories of the tradition’s patriarchs and matriarchs. They do not always behave in the ways we might expect or prefer. I did a safe church training for clergy several months ago, and the instructor pointed out the numerous cases of unhealthy triangulation among the characters in these stories, beginning with Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar. Were these characters alive today, they would all be in intense family therapy.

If you were here last Sunday, you know that I did *not* preach about Abraham’s banishment of Hagar and their son Ishmael at Sarah’s urging; I’ve heard that some of you expressed dismay about that story during coffee hour. Today’s story is even worse: at God’s direction, Abraham prepares Isaac for sacrifice; a visiting angel stops his knife hand just in time. If that last-second stay of execution makes you feel a little better about Abraham and God, then hear this: at least one scholar speculates that, as the story was originally told, Abraham actually *did* kill Isaac that day.³ Combine last week and this week, and you get a patriarch who rid himself of one son and was willing to kill another—and a God whose machinations border on the sadistic.

When faced with a difficult text, I try to imagine the original storytellers, as they attempt to make sense of the world as it was, and to understand humanity’s place in it. *We* read this story and are distressed by God’s cruelly manipulative test, as well as by Abraham’s appallingly compliant response. By the story’s end, we’re disgusted with them both. One of the remarkable things about the Hebrew Scriptures is that they are so honest about human nature—and we humans can be a piece of work. If humans are made in the image of God, well, it may be that God, too, can be a piece of work. This story is at least partly about the changing relationship between humans and God. It seems to me that, for the relationship to change, humans *and* God must change. In the arc of salvation history, God is doing God’s part. It’s humans I’m not so sure about.

Transport this story to today, and it rings frighteningly true: in our harsh world, children are sacrificed all the time. As evidenced by the two big items in the news this week—health care and immigration— an embarrassingly large proportion of *our* nation’s leaders seem willing to sacrifice children in the United States and abroad. The health care legislation proposed by the senate this week sacrifices the lives of children in favor of tax cuts for the wealthy. The government’s refusal of refugees sacrifices the lives of children in order to curry favor with a narrow group of noisy voters. And, a large proportion of our leaders are doing all this—and more—in covenant with a “God” I don’t recognize.

There are a lot of parallels between 1968 and now. For example, our nation is again engaged in a war that history will view as a terrible mistake, a war that has stretched on even longer than the previous one. Children are affected, both abroad in direct consequence of the conflict, and at home because our nation’s resources are being squandered. In the armed services, death is striking fine young people whose cohort is over-represented by blacks and other people of color, and by poor people of all colors.

This past April 4, there was an Opinion piece in *The New York Times* entitled “When Martin Luther King Came Out Against Vietnam.” It was published on the 50th anniversary of a speech that Dr. King delivered at Riverside Church in New York City. Dr. King had long been against the war, but he was reluctant to speak out against President Johnson. The article says this: “Finally, in early 1967, he had had enough. One day Dr. King pushed aside a plate of food while paging through a magazine whose photographs depicted the burn wounds suffered by Vietnamese children who had been struck by napalm.”⁴ In his Riverside speech, Dr. King said that “When ‘profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism and militarism are incapable of being conquered.’ He concluded by calling for ‘a worldwide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one’s tribe, race, class and nation.’”⁵

In the Jewish tradition, a *midrash* is a commentary on or explanation of a biblical or other important text. Some go far beyond what is contained in the text. Many years ago, listening to a short story program on NPR, I heard the reading of a midrash on the story of Abraham and Isaac. Driving and unable to note the author, I’ve never been able to find that short story in print. Still, all these years later, I remember parts of the midrash quite clearly. In it, Sarah gets wind of what’s happening and is dismayed by Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice their only son. Taking no chances, Sarah secretly tethers a ram and follows Abraham and Isaac to that distant place and up the mountain. Hiding behind a rock, *Sarah* provides the voice of the “angel” who stays Isaac’s hand; *Sarah* releases the substitutionary ram; *Sarah* saves her son.

In the viewpoint of a mature faith of any tradition, *all* adults are responsible for protecting *all* children. Twice I've heard Rabbi Herb Brockman, arguing in support of unauthorized immigrants, that people of faith answer to a power higher than any government. I completely agree. And yet we *do* answer to a government. Perhaps more importantly, in this messy and wonderful American democracy, the government also answers to *us*. In the Declaration of Independence, 241 years old on Tuesday, our nation's founders articulated the dream of justice for all. Our relatively young nation remains a beacon of hope, even though we have not yet attained that dream. And so, this July 4, let's celebrate with gusto that we live in a nation in which *we* can take to the public square, carrying the moral imperative of *our* Christianity. And on July 5, let's go find a ram.

Notes

¹ Photo and description of the St. Michael Window are from "Our Windows: St. James' Episcopal Church, Glastonbury, Connecticut," photography by Duffy Schade, compiled by Violet Bidy, Richard Klinck, Peggy Van Ekeren, and Constance Woods, 1983. The image of this window is pasted below.

² From the biography of Major William Wakefield Roush, on the website Military Hall of Honor, available at <http://www.militaryhallofhonor.com/honoree-record.php?id=274451> (accessed June 30, 2017).

³ This idea is from Tzemah Yoreh, Haviv, according to Rettig Gur, in his review of Yoreh's books, "When Abraham Murdered Isaac," *The Times of Israel*, November 28, 2012, available online at <http://www.timesofisrael.com/when-abraham-murdered-isaac/> (accessed June 30, 2017).

⁴ David J. Garrow, "When Martin Luther King Came Out Against Vietnam," *The New York Times*, April 4, 2017, available at https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/04/opinion/when-martin-luther-king-came-out-against-vietnam.html?_r=0 (accessed June 30, 2017).

⁵ Ibid.

