

## God's Awesome Yes!

LECTIONARY STUDIES *for* YEAR A — XIII SUNDAY *of* ORDINARY TIME

Tying this week's texts together: these texts provide answers to the question of "What must we be willing to sacrifice to be faithful?" Genesis tells a complex story of God ending child sacrifice. The Psalm takes the position of one who has made sacrifices and is asking, "Why is God not answering?" Romans speaks tangentially to the question of what sacrifices other believers can demand of us. And Matthew tells us that even a cold cup of water given to one of the little ones is enough of a sacrifice to welcome Jesus into your life.

Nevertheless, this concept of sacrifice is something of a brutal force fit with some of the texts and the stretch marks may show. Genesis can be expanded to talk about the sacrifices we ask of our children (and parenthetically others we mentor or lead) as well as showing us how God limits Godself: God may test us, but God limits how far we must go. The Psalm comes close to making a statement that haunts so many of us, "Silence = Death." Romans gives us another slice of Paul's intricate and complex argument about sin and redemption. And Matthew speaks to us of the various benefits we receive from welcoming people instead of Christ into our midst.

Genesis 22:1-14 — *The Near Sacrifice of Isaac* [In Humanity's earliest years, the sacrifice of first-born children was common enough to be recorded through the ages in history and folklore. It may have served several purposes, the most important for our discussion being how it mediated the relationship between parents and their understanding of the divine. The idea being that the sacrifice was a gift back to a god for a god's gift of fertility, care, prosperity, and protection. I have long thought that this particular story was God's way of stopping these kind of sacrifices.

Although it is not a predominant theme in the New Testament, there is still current in much modern theology and contemporary Christian music the idea of the faithful being tested. If we must accept this idea, and I really do believe it is suspect given the broader scope of what the NT tells us — see pg. A-346 for a more in depth explanation of why I believe this — we must at least acknowledge that God limits the testing that God demands of us. For example, Jesus told us {Matthew 11:30; NRSV} "**My yoke is easy and my burden is light,**" and Paul told us {I Corinthians 10:13} "God will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able — and with any temptation, God will provide the way of escape so that you may be able to endure it."

At most one can say that here God limits Godself to testing Abraham's true feelings about Isaac. But why would God demand such a horrifying sacrifice to determine Abraham's true feelings for Isaac? Perhaps it is because Isaac is still "number two" in Abraham's affections. We know that the loss of Ishmael stung Abraham deeply, and it might be that Isaac was "small potatoes" in comparison. One way of getting Abraham to wake up to how precious Isaac should have been in Abraham's sight was to show him how precious Isaac was in God's Sight — precious enough that a ram would suffice instead of Isaac.

Living our dreams through the lives of our children. While we no longer sacrifice our children to "angry gods," all too often we sacrifice our children for the sake of what we want for them (and us) instead of what God wants for them. Sometimes this is incidental to our best efforts at giving our children the best life we can (sin of omission) but sometimes it is so that we can accomplish through them what we were not able to do ourselves (sin of commission). The classic example of the latter is the father who lives out his own sports glory in the gridiron victories of one of his sons, even though his son may hate the sport he is being forced to play. Other examples are the expectations we place on children to take over the family farm or

## God's Awesome Yes!

LECTIONARY STUDIES *for* YEAR A — XIII SUNDAY *of* ORDINARY TIME

business, or our expectations that they will maintain certain family traditions which may be completely alien to their demeanor. And legions of glbti/q people can testify to how disappointed their parents have been because their sons and daughters do not dutifully provide them with grandchildren to dote over and to “spoil rotten.” The list goes on nearly forever, but it is very easy for us to ask more of our children than we ought. Just as God chooses to limit Godself with God's Children, so should we limit what we require of ours.

But you say, is not there a very real difference between child sacrifice and asking a sacrifice from a child? Certainly — but be careful, some of the things parents and societies ask of their children are the moral equivalent of sacrificing them. Why? Because sometimes it kills their hopes and dreams when they have to put their best efforts into satisfying ours. The worst example of this, is any time we ask our eighteen year olds to go off and fight wars for our benefit — all too often this sacrifice of their youthful hopes and dreams leads to their death or maiming. (And it is always a sacrifice because no one goes to a war without being permanently changed psychologically — there is no “innocence” left after a war takes its toll.) But as this week's Psalm says, when our dreams are silenced by too much opposition we sleep the sleep of death.

If we broaden our scope from considering just this selection, we can see that the story of Abraham and Sarah and God is far more complex than a simple, “listen and obey” interpretation allows. God claimed Abraham and Sarah as God's own when God called them into a new life and guided them through many a trial and joy, but they were not puppets. They had their own hopes and dreams (fears as well) and God let them do things which to us would seem scandalous. God was giving them a measure of free will even in the context of their being the two who must go through certain hoops to become the parents of God's Chosen Family. This model of interactive free will is the one we should apply to our children as well (less so as they are very young; more so as they mature and can make rational decisions on their own). Otherwise, we sacrifice not only our children's hopes and dreams, but because the Holy Spirit is living in them as well, God's Hopes and Dreams for them and what they will do for the Body of Christ.]

For text and additional commentary see pp. A-298/299 (Easter Vigil).

Psalm 13 — [As human beings possessing only limited time spans, one of the greatest sacrifices we can make is patience. Having the patience for a God whose time span is unlimited to fulfill the Promise in our lives can be nerve-racking at best. It is thus not unnatural for us to cry out “How long?” or to plead, “In our life time!”

In the first part of the Psalm, the question is, “How long must I sacrifice my hopes and dreams while my enemies take profits and have their own way — are not my hopes and dreams as valuable and worthy as those of my enemies who do not obey God?” A most legitimate question. Jesus promised us Abundant Life — even though he also says {Matthew 5:11-12} **“Blessed are you when you are insulted and persecuted, and they say all manner of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad! For your reward in Heaven is great, for in the same way they persecuted the Prophets who came before you.”** See the difference a Heaven makes? For the Psalmist the end of life was the non-being of Sheol; for Jesus, the end of life was the transition to a new and eternal life in Heaven. So to one extent, God can legitimately answer, “You will receive in good time, it just may be in Heaven instead of on Earth.” Nevertheless, that is not always the most comforting news, and we should not be ashamed to mourn the loss of some

## God's Awesome Yes!

LECTIONARY STUDIES *for* YEAR A — XIII SUNDAY *of* ORDINARY TIME

aspect of our Abundant Life in the earthly realm that our “enemies” (both internal and external) are preventing us from enjoying — for our earthly existence is after all as much of a gift as our future residency in Heaven.

In the initial hey day of AIDS activism, because of the silence of the government, religious leaders, and oh so many more, the slogan “Silence = Death” was developed and frequently used. In v. 3 David is saying that for God not to answer (= Silence) leads to his sleeping death’s sleep (= Death). No conversation with God; no life. I am reminded by some interfaith work that I am doing that silence is a virtue in some faith settings. But it was not for Jesus nor for David. The lack of a conversation, or too much silence in the flow of a conversation is not good. While I recognize that sometimes God can remain silent on purpose, it is not because God is breaking off the conversation, it is because we either need to shut up so God can get a word in edge wise, or because we are persistently asking the wrong questions. Love affairs are not the affairs of silence but of conversation — even lying quietly in each other’s arms, there is still a physical and spiritual conversation going on — just without words. Why then would we want silence in our relationship with God any more than with an earthly partner?

What am I getting at? To withhold an answer, or a favor, or a grace, is as bad as asking for an intentional sacrifice. Why? Because the sacrifice happens any way: the recipient of our silence is sacrificed to death’s sleep. This means, that in the context of the hungry, when we withhold food they die. In the context of the sick, when we withhold medicine (or price it so high that they can not afford it) they are sacrificed to death. In the context of the hopes and dreams of our children, when we withhold approval or assistance, or are overly critical, those dreams and hopes die. When we remain silent about any concern (so often a sin of omission) the recipient of our silence is sacrificed and may very well die.

In contrast, David puts his fears of God remaining silent, and of God taking too long to answer into the context of God having been bountiful with him in the past. For those of us with long histories in the faith in which we have experienced God provide for us again and again, we can easily understand David’s response. For those who are new to the faith and very needy, we have the responsibility of sharing our own experiences with them of this bountiful provisioning, as well as helping them to become convinced that just like us, them as well. Why? Because the answer to “How long” is always not a time and date, but “God has done this before and will do it again.”]

To the Music Leader.

A Psalm of David.

<sup>1</sup>How long O YHVH-God?

Will You forget me forever?

How long will You hide Your Face from me?

<sup>2</sup>How long must I wrestle<sup>1</sup> in my soul,

daily bearing grief in my heart?

How long will my enemies be exalted over me?

<sup>3</sup>Consider and answer me, O YHVH-God!

---

<sup>1</sup> Literally, “*make counsels*.”

God's Awesome Yes!  
LECTIONARY STUDIES *for* YEAR A — XIII SUNDAY *of* ORDINARY TIME

Give light to my eyes or I shall sleep death's sleep,  
<sup>4</sup>and my enemy will say, "I have prevailed over you."  
And my foes will rejoice when I am shaken.

<sup>5</sup>But I trust in Your Loving-Kindness;  
my heart rejoices in Your Salvation.  
I will sing to YHVH-God,  
because He/She has dealt bountifully with me.<sup>2</sup>

Romans 6:12-23 — *Freedom from the Slavery of Sin/Failure* [Paul and early Christianity took a daring step when they conceived of salvation on the basis of faith alone. Doing so zeroes out the oppression of sin because sin is predominately associated with the works we do or do not do. Nevertheless, they must have been haunted (and it would seem most Christians still are) with the "problem" of: if grace is the origin and guarantee of our salvation, then how do we respond to those who say or act as if "anything goes?"

Much of Paul's writings seem to take us to the "anything goes" peak of this grace-absolute only to force us to stumble back down the hillside with one caveat after another. Inevitably this has led to reams of interpretation, and generations of Christians who can not agree on where the thin line between "too much" and "not enough" lies. We experience this today in the arguments in denominations and societies about where the boundaries of permissible sexuality lie: what constitutes "too much" (although one seldom hears arguments for "not enough" with respect to sexuality).

And it is in such a context that we must protest the common use of 6:23's "the wages of sin are death" which we see on placards at AIDS Walks and Pride Parades. It completely misses the point. Only someone who has not read and wrestled with the rest of Paul's argument in *all* of Romans, or who simply does not care about what Paul wrote, could rip this passage out of its context and desecrate it by using it so falsely. For Paul, grace has "enslaved" us to righteousness, and as believers we have been freed (permanently) of sin. Why? Because our relationship is no longer with sin but the righteousness obtained through Christ. Thus, to use 6:23's statement against *any* Christian does not make sense — this is what we have *already* been saved *from*. Simply put, if the wages of sin are *still* death, then the Cross is meaningless. But, when you accept Christ, the Cross cancels out the death sentence imposed by sin upon your life, not your sexual orientation, nor your same-sex love and living relationships. All that these placard-holding protestors are saying, aside from displaying their ignorance, is that to them we can not be Christians. But as Paul will write in Philippians 2:12, it is our responsibility to work out our salvation, not theirs.

In Psalm 13, I spoke to the issue of "Silence = Death." Another way of saying this, is that silence must not be allowed to have dominion over you, nor may we impose it upon others. In this case, God's Answer given on the Cross means that sin shall never again have dominion over believers. Anytime we allow sin to have sway over a believer we are investing in silence if we are not standing in solidarity with that victim of sin. Remember: as a result of having been freed from making any further sacrifices to sin, we are able to be instruments of Justice. Hmm. Think

---

<sup>2</sup> Many translations present the last two clauses as v. 6. The NJB includes an additional clause included in the Septuagint, "let me sing to the name of Yahweh the Most High!"

## God's Awesome Yes!

LECTIONARY STUDIES *for* YEAR A — XIII SUNDAY *of* ORDINARY TIME

about that: we can be instruments of justice as we work to free others from sin. Justice is not just about obtaining rights for us, but of providing the opportunities for repentance to those who are sinfully oppressing us. Of course the reverse is also true if we are the oppressors!

And note carefully what Paul has to say about the saving grace of Grace contrasted to the Law. He asks rhetorically “Shall we sin because we are not under the Law but under Grace?” (v. 15) If instead of asking this as a question we were to state it as a sentence, we could legitimately read this thought as, “We do not sin because we are under Grace instead of the Law.” Although he will develop this more fully in chapters 7-8, this is as good a way of expressing Christian freedom from the dictates of the Law as any. It does not mean that anything goes — Grace does include the requirement of mutual love, but it does free us from alien concepts being jammed down our throats as righteous simply because someone else believes they are the way things ought to be. Rest assured that consensual and non-abusive sex is within Grace’s sure embrace, and as believers we have the responsibility of working out with ourselves and with those with whom we have sexual relationships what constitutes a faithful expression of God’s Gift to us of our sexuality — just as we must {Philippians 2:13} work out for ourselves what is Salvation, so also our sexuality which is a subset of our Salvation.

Verses 16-18 warn us that “whatever we pay homage to can become idols” and is reminding us to only worship God. But not just worship, for this is more like becoming married to God and the righteousness which will naturally follow from such a “Holy Union.” Notice also, the frank admission that once we were slaves to sin, but having listened whole-heartedly to the example Paul teaches and having been freed from sin (through baptism and belief) you have become married to righteousness. Once again, Paul is talking about a change in relationships. Before we were married to sin, but becoming a believer divorces us from sin and marries us to Christ/God.

Nowhere in this passage does Paul require perfection, which on his understanding (Romans 3:23) is de facto impossible. What he is advocating for us is a change of relationship away from sin. Perfection, or more properly, the pursuit of perfection, will flow naturally from that new relationship with God. But why should we give up all those fun things we used to do when we were sinning night and day and enjoying it to the hilt? Paul’s answer, which admittedly takes a level of maturity and experience in the faith to embrace, is his cautioning us of the consequences of such wantonness: death being the strongest possible consequence imaginable, but in truth worse, the loss of Eternal-Life. If those are the negative consequences, there are positive consequences of letting that past go and becoming married to God: freedom, holiness and no more shame.]

<sup>12</sup>Therefore do not let failure reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lustful<sup>3</sup> desires,  
<sup>13</sup>neither yield up parts of your body to failure as instruments of injustice; rather stand by God, as those alive from the dead, as instruments {*Greek = weapons*} of God’s Justice. <sup>14</sup>For failure shall not have dominion over you, for you do not live under the Law, but under grace.

<sup>15</sup>What then? Shall we fail because we are not under the Law but under grace? No, never!  
<sup>16</sup>Do you not know that the one to whom you yield yourselves as slaves, slaves you are to that one whom you obey, whether to failure which yields death, or to obedience which yields righteousness? <sup>17</sup>But thanks be to God! Although you once were slaves to failure, you have since

---

<sup>3</sup> Should not be read solely as “sexual” desires, but any greedy or malicious desire.

## God's Awesome Yes!

LECTIONARY STUDIES *for* YEAR A — XIII SUNDAY *of* ORDINARY TIME

listened whole heartedly to the example of the teaching which was entrusted to you,<sup>18</sup> and having been freed from failure, you have become partnered to righteousness.

<sup>19</sup>Because of the weakness of your flesh, I am speaking in human terms — for just as you have yielded parts of your body as slaves to uncleanness and iniquity, which led to even more iniquity, so now yield the parts of your body as partners to justice and righteousness which leads to holiness. <sup>20</sup>For when you were slaves to failure, you were not in a relationship with righteousness. <sup>21</sup>Therefore, what advantage did you formerly obtain from those things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of those things is death. <sup>22</sup>But having now been freed from failure and having been partnered to God, you receive your advantage in holiness — and its outcome is life eternal. <sup>23</sup>For the wages of failure are death, but God's Gift is life eternal in Christ Jesus our Savior.

Matthew 10:40-42 [Jesus says that those who follow the prophets or the just (perhaps these days it would be better to say the philosophers or the righteous politicians, or other such trend setters) will indeed receive their reward, but it is not an eternal reward, for that can only come from a disciple who follows Jesus who was sent by God. There are other ways leading to a good earthly life, but there are no other ways leading to this Promise of Eternal-Life. The Church has all too often failed to recognize this. For instance, in my own situation, I built a life on ethical practice, the study of ethics having saved my earthly life from despair at age 19, and it gave me a good if lonely life, but it was not the best life I could have had. I only claimed that life when I re-discovered Christ. If only someone believable had come along, much like Paul in his Athenian discourse (Acts 17) and showed me that what I was missing could be filled with the Christ I already knew, I could have moved towards living Abundant-Life decades earlier.

When we work with the unchurched or seekers, it is useful to congratulate them on what they have already achieved, while offering them hope for a true blessing, and a blessing which can not be taken away by swings in the stock market, old age, or the unpredictability of ones children, or partner, or...etc.

The other thing here in the context of our discussion of sacrifices, is Jesus' statement about even a cold cup of water being enough. In the discussion on Psalm 13, I wrote about withholding some small grace from someone as potentially leading to their death, possibly physical; possibly spiritual. Here Jesus is turning that phrase around and saying that it is enough to sacrifice just a kind word, a drink of water, or whatever is appropriate to the circumstances to show that you are living the Gospel. It also says something about how "little a thing" can often be enough to get someone moving out of their address in "No Way Out" to greener pastures. Sort of, "Don't forget the small things," or, "some times the trees are as important as the forest."]

### *Sharing the Presence of Christ*

*Parallels: Mark 9:37, 41 (Luke 10:16, John 12:44-45)*

<sup>40</sup>Those welcoming you welcome me, and those welcoming me welcome the One who sent me.

<sup>41</sup>Whoever welcomes a Prophet because they are a Prophet will receive a Prophet's reward, just as whoever welcomes a just person because they are just will receive a just person's reward.

<sup>42</sup>And whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones<sup>4</sup> because he/she is a

---

<sup>4</sup> "Little ones" means more than just children: it also means anyone without status, power, dignity, independence, safety, security,

God's Awesome Yes!  
LECTIONARY STUDIES *for* YEAR A — XIII SUNDAY *of* ORDINARY TIME

disciple<sup>5</sup> — Amen! I say to you: he/she will not lose his/her reward.

---

etc. in a society.

<sup>5</sup> Faced with a Greek expression which did not translate very "sensibly" into English, and the differences in the reference translations, I have followed the work of M. Eugene Boring, who claims that "in the name of a disciple" is a Semitism which should be read as "because one is." See the [New Interpreter's Bible](#), Vol. VIII, pg. 263.