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St. Luke's, Renton, WA
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Genesis 22.1-14

Sacrifice. In baseball [here's a baseball metaphor from me, the first, maybe the last, so savor it] ... in baseball a sacrifice is when a batter intentionally puts herself out by bunting or hitting a fly into the outfield so that a team-mate on base may advance. I know, I looked it up on the internet.

In checkers, it's called a sacrifice when a player intentionally allows himself to be jumped in order to be in a more advantageous position.

In life we make sacrifices: one may live frugally in order to save for something she really wants. He might sacrifice professional advancement for the sake of being home with the kids. Or vice versa, one might pay the consequences of years of schooling to advance their career.

Sacrifice is part of our modern parlance and understanding. It comes, of course, from the religious practice where sacrifice literally means "to make sacred". Something is given-up, something is offered, and made sacred for a greater good. Be it grain, a pigeon and a pear-tree, two ewe lambs, or a first-born son, something is offered, something is set aside marked as holy, or belonging to God. A sacrifice was made in gratitude—offered in thanksgiving, or with intention or hope of something to come.

Primal religion viewed sacrifice as a way to appease or please the god or God. "Throw God a bone and he will be on your side in battle."

In the religion of ancient Israel there were various types of sacrifices or offerings. Burnt offerings were those which were placed upon the altar and burned either in part or wholly [from which we get the word holocaust—a total devastation.] This made the prophets of justice furious for the waste when others starved. Thus sacrifices were also offered to God but allowed to be used. The turning of one's heart, amendment of life, and praise of God became known as sacrifice.

Whatever, the meaning of religious sacrifice is an offering of a portion of what is in our control to God as a means of proclaiming one's orientation toward God.

While we commonly use the language of sacrifice, and go through the motions of religious sacrifice every time we gather in this place, it is a concept that is, shall we say, less a part of our modern understanding and consciousness than it was for our ancient forbearers in faith.

There is a tension between the spirituality of sacrifice and our culture's inspiration of an "I-want-it-all" life. It is an age-old tension that is played out dramatically, terrifyingly, in our Old Testament story today.

We shy away from facing the story of Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac (our first reading) because it is a terrifying story. It is a terrible story to modern sensibilities. It may, at first, strike us as a particularly jarring story to tell on a day when we celebrate the baptism of little Dominic Donati. But here it is.

To get some sense of the importance of the story, we have to remember the road we've traveled in the Abraham and Sarah saga over the past weeks. You will remember that God promised Abram a land and a future and told him, late in life, to shove off from the place that was familiar and go to a land that God would show him.

Next, we remember, after years and years of not bearing children together, and after Abraham bore a son with his surrogate, Hagar, God tells Abraham that Sarah will conceive and bear a child. Sarah gets big belly laugh out of that, as Abraham is 99 years old and she's no spring chicken. But it comes to pass. That promised future, seemingly against all the odds, comes to be: Abraham and Sarah have Isaac.

God placed the dream of an important future in Abraham's heart, but it would come in God's way and in God's time. And now that it seems Abraham finally has the world by the tail: he has been shown the land to which he is to receive, he has the promised son, now, in one last turn to the story ... "Is Abraham truly faithful?" God wonders. "Take your son, your only son, the son whom you love, who is your future and offer him on one of the mountains ... that I shall show you." [Remember in the beginning Abraham is to go to a land that God will show him]. Without question, Abraham does so. As they walk along, Isaac asks his father, "Father the fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for the offering?" Abraham says, "God himself will provide the lamb for the sacrifice, my son." So the two of them walked along together.

The two of them walked along together. The two of them walked along together not having any idea what they were walking into except Abraham trusted God and Isaac trusted his father. Is this the tragic ending of Abraham's dream? Of his future? Yet he's come this far by faith.

Here, in its most stark form is the tension between "I want it all for myself" and the will to offer to God what is Gods. Abraham was about to claim his future and there is this one last test, putting that whole future at risk.

In the story, Abraham, willing to sacrifice, proves himself faithful, faithful to a fault. God does provide and God's providence is in the form of a Ram caught in a thicket.

In baptism we say something very different than "I want it all for me." In baptism we acknowledge that Dominic and each and every one of us lives in the mercy of God. In baptism, we acknowledge that we die in Christ and therefore live in Christ. Our lives: from our birthing to our dying and our living are all held in trust to the God of life. Laurie and Tony bring their beloved child to this place and to these waters where he begins his faith journey as one who will be called upon to be faithful in that tension between a life oriented toward himself: "I want it all" or a life oriented to God and lived faithfully and in thanksgiving for all God's gifts and mercies.

One turns us in on ourselves, makes us hardened, and shrivels our lives. The other turns us out toward one another as people who live in gratitude and by faith.

Every Eucharist and especially every baptism is an occasion for us to reclaim the faith that is ours, to re-affirm the faith that is our and our willingness to live by faith despite all of the lures to live otherwise.

Come to the waters, come to the feast, let us make offerings, mark this child as holy, and our lives a sacrifice to the God who gives us life.

