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Feast of the Presentation, 2020
Trinity Episcopal Church, Torrington, CT

Today is the feast of the Presentation of our Lord, Jesus. The liturgical nerds among us also know it is also Candlemas. What presenting Jesus has to do with Candles will be a lesson for another year, because today I will focus on the Presentation.

The Gospel writer Luke tells us that Jesus' parents were good Hebrews: 40 days after he was born, Jesus was "Presented in the Temple." Now we have all heard this so many times that we have stopped asking - why was Jesus, or any other child for that matter, "presented?"

Does anyone here know why Jesus was presented? Does anyone know why any children were presented? No? Good. If you already knew the answer I would have wasted a bunch of time writing this.

The long answer is somewhat alarming to a modern, liberal, educated, religious mind; I will show you why, but bear with me as we will have to take a few steps back to do it. As ancient and archaic as the Presentation of Jesus may seem, it was actually a highly evolved ritual in its own right. That is backwards step #1 - the Presentation of a child in the temple as an evolved ritual.

The Bible, as I hope you know, is not a single book written by a single author. Different authors contributed at different times to the various "books of the bible," and even different books that are ascribed to specific authors were often an accumulation of different records and even oral traditions.

Who exactly wrote what? And when were the different parts actually written, or when were they first spoken as part of the oral histories? There are a number of tools and techniques to make an educated guess - all of which is beyond what fits in a sermon, and most of which is beyond my own intellectual prowess as an academic. But that is backwards step #2 - chronology and composition.

Which is all to say - backward step #3, - the story of Abraham and Isaac and the sacrifice and the ram in the thicket, is actually one of the oldest strands of tradition in the book we call the bible. And it highlights many pieces that inform the Feast we celebrate today. Do you remember the story? God tells Abraham to sacrifice (kill) his only and firstborn son, Isaac. After what must have been an incredibly awkward gathering of wood and kindling, tying up of Isaac, an angel stops Abraham.

We have all heard numerous sermons about how faithful Abraham was to trust that God would find another way - and if those messages helped you see God in the weeks that followed, that is wonderful. But looking at this ancient story with a more historical lens, there is a pretty solid argument that this tale betrays an early Jewish practice of human sacrifice. Abraham doesn't protest God's request to kill his firstborn son - perhaps because such an act was seen as normal in Abraham's world. In the Episcopal church we are free to ask hard questions - and sometimes we get hard answers.

Now that I've already broached the topic of human sacrifice in one of our most beloved stories, and all of us first-born are maybe squirming and sweating a bit, where did *that* even come from? Where would killing the firstborn come from? And what does that have to do with the Presentation? Well, time for backwards step # 4. The last one for today, I promise. There was an early religious practice of the "tithe" where the first-fruits were given to God. Our modern interpretation of tithe is giving money and filling out pledge cards, but if you wonder where it all comes from, these are the roots.

The sacrifice of the firstborn was really a logical extension of giving to God of the first-fruits. It was believed that every first-born animal-including humans - was God's property, and the way one "gave" an animal to God was to slaughter the animal and burn its flesh on the altar. The Hebrew word usually translated in our scriptures as "to devote to God" means, literally, "to destroy utterly."

In the Abraham story, we see the beginning of something new: we see what will become an intricate system of redemption being worked out: in at least certain cases one was able to substitute a different animal to save one of the first-born. God was given his due, and the firstborn child was allowed to live. The price for a firstborn son at the time of Jesus' infancy was a ram. Unless the family were poor, which Jesus family was. And then the ram could be replaced by two doves or two young pigeons.

Taking a few steps forward, many Christians still carry this logic forward into today - viewing Christ's sacrifice, his being killed on the cross, as being a substitute for everyone else who deserves to die, or even being a substitute for all of creation that is lacking or owed to the creator in the eyes of God.

Now I personally believe that Jesus was much more than simply a perfect substitute for the brutal punishment "owed" to many, but it is a strand of our tradition that needs to be dealt with. And if you ever wonder where *that* came from, that Jesus suffered death in our place to "buy" us or "redeem" us, what I have shared are the roots for that tradition as well - Giving of the firstfruits "owed" to God, and killing being the way in which one "gave" a living creature to God.

So, enough time in the classroom. What is the Spirit saying to us today? Or, if we were practicing Dwelling in the Word, what would my contribution be?

I think the answer is actually hidden from our modern sensibilities.

But first, a disclaimer. In what I am about to say, I am *not* advocating the killing of any firstborn as a “sacrifice” to God. I am the firstborn of two very devout Christians and would not be here if they “sacrificed” me. If you believe that God requires “payment” to be placated we should talk.

That said, there may in fact be something useful in thinking of sacrifice as destruction. As we strive to live holy lives, and condition our spiritual imaginations, what might we benefit from giving over to destruction? When we give money to the church, from our perspective it really is destroyed. It is no longer our money. We give faithfully, and hope that the money is being used for holy purposes, maybe we even get to see the fruits of that work, but at the first step, we are giving it away. There is an intrinsic as well as symbolic spiritual value in “sacrificing” our firstfruits - which for 21st Century Americans, is time, which is money. Which is why I think it is important to leave the offering plate on the altar during the Eucharistic prayer - although you may have noticed that I do stop short of hitting it with a blowtorch.

Taking our gaze from outside ourselves to inside ourselves, there is much that needs to be sacrificed as well. But I unfortunately need a disclaimer here too: one of the great tragedies of our history is that we as a church, we as clergy, have instructed people that what needed to be sacrificed to God was parts of ourselves that we actually need to be whole: we have told people that sexual encounter, sexual desire is bad and should be “sacrificed,” destroyed. That doubt should be “sacrificed,” and rather confidence held up, along with resolve, strength, and spiritual prowess. And the result is that good and faithful people have hated themselves, hated their bodies, and some have even taken their own lives in part due to these perceived deficiencies. Many of you know some of the stories - people who couldn’t hear that God loved them and even made them the way they are ON PURPOSE.

I’m talking about a different kind of sacrifice - one that happens within us. A different kind of “utter destruction,” one that ultimately heals rather than corrodes.

And anyone who has invested real time in spiritual practice, in meditation, knows what I’m talking about.

We carry tons of garbage around in our heads all the time. What we will do, how we will do it, who we are, how to navigate conflict or conceal our own failures- whatever. It could be the healthcare system (which is a mess), taxes (which is a mess), family relationships (which is a mess), even church! In fact, as children of this country we are *specially trained* to carry garbage around in our heads - even with Seminary I have had 20 years of school honing and tuning my ability to hold, tear apart, and reconstruct all kinds of garbage. Careers are made using this garbage well.

Which means that destructive sacrifice, for us, has a contemporary value if it means letting go of all of that garbage. Spiritual sacrifice today doesn’t involve killing animals and puddles of blood, but literally sitting in a chair trying to be open to the presence of God as your mind struggles to convince you that you are your mind. Spiritual sacrifice today means bracketing all of the stuff you wish you were doing right now instead, or what you feel like you should be doing right now instead of being right here.

And doing that takes courage, resolve, and persistence: we sacrifice the noise to God.

I mentioned sitting in a chair, referring to a spiritual practice many of you may know of as Centering Prayer. I know there are other tools - maybe you have some other way of regularly burning off all of the accumulated cerebral soot and anxiety - but if you really want to follow Jesus you really need to offer, to be open to destroying, all of the oppressive bits of your own mind. Even the ones that say that they are you.

If you have never done it, or you haven't done it in a while, it can feel like "you" are being lost, destroyed. Sacrificed. Give it all to God - who desires not death and blood but wholeness, peace, and redemption.

Put differently, there are many things in life that the tighter we grip, the more we will strangle our own spirit.

Whatever we are holding too tightly changes, maybe day to day, maybe week to week, definitely from season to season. What is it for you right now? And how might you relax your grasp just enough to allow the Holy Spirit to work?

Amen.