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Blood and sacrifice
The Third Sunday of Lent, Year C
Sunday, March 24, 2019
The Rev. Amber Carswell

One of the things that still catches me by surprise, though it shouldn't by now, is opening the Bible and finding our daily news splashed across the surface in these old stories, if we have eyes to see them or ears to hear them. Recently, I overheard a child in Sunday School grumble quietly, "But Jesus died two thousand years ago," which is on the one hand, expressing an understandable boredom at a subject he would rather not sit through — but on the other, to overly analyze his statement, I think it belies a modern tendency to set these stories in the past and to say, "They were of a different time, this is irrelevant." I can also find Jesus boring and irrelevant — not the Jesus of Scripture, but the Jesus who has been simplified for our modern palates into bland platitudes about love or forgiveness, sugar-coated and sentimental. But open the Bible for more than a minute and he is someone else entirely.

Take our gospel today. Folks were talking about a group of Galileans — pilgrims on their way to sacrifice in Jerusalem. They were gruesomely murdered perhaps even in the act of that sacrifice. Their blood was mingled with the blood of the animals they brought to the temple, the text reads. Pilate, the governor of the occupation, murdered them. What happened exactly is not recorded in history beyond the Bible; we don't know much else other than that an act like this was historically unnoticeable in the relative scope of Pilate's brutality.

The people talking to Jesus try to make sense of why it happened. Surely, their offerings were unsuitable. Surely they had some sin, some reason this gruesome fate befell them. Jesus desacralizes the event, takes away the cosmic significance. He says, "You think they were worse than any of the rest of us? No. You, too, will die in just the same way if you don't repent."

A chill descends at his words. What are we to repent of to avoid such a fate?

Repenting of sin is almost uniformly understood as that personal sense of having done wrong. You and I come from a Western consciousness that values our self above all, our individual liberties, personality tests, the solitary hero, have it your way, master of your destiny, bootstraps, customizing, accessorizing, "this is truth to me", all the primacy of self. We think of sin in this way. I don't know about you, but I can feel bad about who I am — if there are words I can mean week in and week out, is that there were things I have done and about four million things I have left undone, let me give you a list.

You see the struggle everywhere. The memes that circulate online featuring light blue backgrounds and sweet hand-illustrated smiling suns saying "you are enough" like some pastel-colored absolution of the sins which hold such powerful judgment over you. But I do not think we are as able to perceive when our individual sins begin to collect, to take on not a life of their own, but a death of their own.

In 2001, I was a sophomore at Skyline High School, marching in formation with my snare drum at the Kansas State Fair on the eleventh day of September. We watched the news unfold under the 4-H tents, the buildings collapsing above the sight of the blue ribbon begonias and soil conservation projects. In the fervor of unquestioning patriotism that arose after the event, it's hard to remember that there was a time when it

was a question as to what our response would be. As both a burgeoning evangelical and a teenager with a disdain for authority, I did not know what to think of myself as an American.

On the Sunday that followed, pastors responded from the pulpit, as we do. Bill Hybels was the pastor of Willow Creek, an evangelical mega-super-corporate-branded-stadium-church. In a study done of evangelical responses after September 11, there was exactly one sermon from a mega church that questioned our tendency to fight violence with violence, that following Jesus might actually demand that we love our enemies, to forgive and pray for them, to ask ourselves the hard questions of our penchant for revenge — and that was Hybels.

He rocked the evangelical world the next week, invited an imam to speak from the pulpit; what if we tried to understand our neighbors better? It didn't last. Hybels caved. In mega-super-corporate-branded-stadium-church, decisions like that are bad for business, see, maybe in other churches, too. He turned entirely to the easy message of us being God's own special people, stopped asking the hard questions. It is so difficult to face the cross.¹

These individual responses, these small sins of hatred against an enemy, pooled, metastasized; they took on a death of their own. We see its bloody wake around the world.

The Galileans went to sacrifice in Jerusalem. Or were they New Zealanders? Or folks from Charlottesville? I don't remember. But sacrifice — now there is an idea we like to leave in the past and say, “That was a different time, that is irrelevant.” It's something that I hear plenty of Christians scoff about — the barbaric idea that the killing of animals would expiate sin or appease the gods.

But Abraham Heschel says that the sacrificial system is not so different, after all, from what you and I know. “The sacrificial cult was endowed with supreme political significance. It was the chief requirement for the security of the land and may be regarded as analogous to the cult of military defense in our own day. Both have their roots in the concern for security. Cease to appease the gods with offerings on the altars and their anger will strike you down. Sacrificing is a way of preventing the attack.”²

Think of it this way: I am allergic to poison ivy. But if I am going out for a hike through the underbrush, I can take these homeopathic poison ivy pills — they contain a small dose of the poison ivy itself. I take it in, and my body does not react to the oil. The same concept is at work here: a little holy violence done to an animal, and the worse sort of violence will not visit you. A bit of homeopathic violence in the name of security, the safer you are.³

What are we to repent of?

The sacrificial system is alive and well. But Jesus says, unless you repent of this type of thinking, that it is necessary for a little violence, that promoting one's own welfare over the welfare of others, that your security and well-being have to be bought on the backs of others, you too will perish in this same violence.

And what would have happened if one man with the influence over a cornerstone evangelical church, had stepped out of the sacrificial system? What if the desire for ease and security were brought down a few notches in their worth to you? What if your bitterness and anger over past and present hurts did not dictate your response in the world? What if you could step out of the cycle of violence against others, against the earth, against the nameless multitudes of people whose misery is a necessary sacrifice for your leisure?

Jesus gave himself for us, an offering and sacrifice to God. And while he showed us a way out of this sacrificial thinking, I have to think that stepping out of the way of sacrifice, will feel a little like death, too.

¹ A story from a remarkable collection of essays by Megan O'Gieblyn called *Interior States*.

² From Heschel's *The Prophets*

³ This borrows greatly from the thinking of James Alison, particularly *On Being Liked*.

But the thing about Christianity is that our central belief is that death becomes life: the weekly funeral here becomes a feast, celebrated at a table with enough room for all.