

Most of you here, if I'm not mistaken, are from somewhere else. You've come to settle in this area attracted by the way it suits your desires. The lifestyle, recreational or business opportunities, the weather, the tax structure, I don't know what. Something drew you to make Central Oregon your home. Like Abraham, by faith, you desired a better country than the one you left.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews makes the point that there is a dynamic relationship between the temporary homes we now inhabit and the one promised, the "city prepared" for us, the house not made with human hands. It is our anticipation and desire for that "better country" that both helps us to appreciate the one we currently dwell in and also to look forward with longing to the one promised "whose architect and builder is God."

I know you have just completed a new building and you have some sense of how the architecture of worship "plays" with this dynamic. Often churches are consciously intended to look back at the old as well as looking forward. Often the nave looks like Noah's Ark turned on end. That's why it's called the nave. Not uncommonly by the placement of altar and candles and sometimes a location for reserving the sacrament contemporary worship spaces call to mind the architecture of the ancient temple in Jerusalem. By means of the art of murals, statuary or stained glass church buildings draw us forward to the end of history, as if enabling us to greet ahead of time what we will finally inherit that was so long ago promised.

It turns out that all this language of buildings and cities is about the ideas we inhabit as well, about our notions of the "things of God," about our theology, how we make sense of our lives. The New Testament makes transformational use of the complex language of the sacrificial system or cult which was at the center of Second Temple Judaism until the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in seventy AD. It is this instance of this transformational dynamic, this transfiguration of sacrifice that I want to explore with you today.

Architects, as I have come to appreciate, either apply tried and true solutions that are common to their time and place, or they so radically reinterpret the old solutions as to effectively create a new time and place. That is the way Jesus and the church turned on its head the pattern sacrifice at the heart of religious life in his time. Jesus was a known critic of sacrifice and the Temple, but there were plenty of precursors to Jesus' critique of sacrifice.

Among the best examples are the writings of the eighth century BC prophets like Isaiah. Isaiah's concern especially in passages like this is usually identified as social justice and the condemnation of empty hypocritical worship. The poor are ignored or worse, actively oppressed, while their oppressors offer God beautiful liturgies and make prayers asking safety from their enemies. Isaiah prophesies against the people: "When you stretch out your hands (to pray), I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." True, Isaiah's prophesy exposes the blindness of the people to their own disregard for the poor.

But something more is going on here than the cry of God to "Let justice roll down!" The language is dripping with irony about sacrificial worship itself: "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? . . . I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats." God seems puzzled where they got the idea of sacrifice in the first place, "When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand?"

Sacrifice is fairly universal in the ancient world. Animals usually become a substitute for humans at an early point in the development of human consciousness. Anthropologically, with the development of law, hierarchy, ritual, and myth, sacrificial worship appears to have the function of ordering human society by means of a periodic controlled repetitive reenactment of violence to keep rivalry and resentment from erupting into uncontrollable violent chaos. Onto such powerful common rituals was immediately projected both the divine aspirations and the demonic fears of the community.

Just because these rituals have become televised and digitized and may no longer involve the actual shedding of blood doesn't mean that we have evolved beyond our primitive need to be calmed by sacrificial rituals. In times of crisis we still look for scapegoats. How else do you explain the burning of Martha Stewart at the stake? The fact that such violent spectacles are used to sell products or, in the parlance of the business, to deliver us to advertisers, suggests that we are still caught in the grip of making sacrificial offerings to "whatever gods may be" in order to gain security and safety from our enemies. And these sacrificial reactions operate on families and individuals as well. We find ourselves in the same repetitive patterns again and again at our own or someone else's expense.

However the practice of making animal sacrifices originally came to the children of Israel, it is never quite at home as the passage from Isaiah makes clear. Whether it is something they learned from the nations around them or something

God told them to do, it has never set well, despite the massive edifice of the temple, because the genius of the account of God we learn from the Hebrew scripture is that it is told from the point of view of the sacrificial victim.

Think of the story told by the prophet Nathan to confront powerful King David in his adultery with Bathsheba and his subsequent murder of her husband Uriah:

“The Lord sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, "There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. 2 The rich man had very many flocks and herds; 3 but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. 4 Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him." 5 Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; . . . 7 Nathan said to David, "You are the man!"

In this case the victim from whose point of view the story is told is at once the ewe lamb sacrificed for the rich man's religious duty to his guest, and at the same time Uriah the just and honorable soldier whom the king has sacrificed to cover-up his iniquity. And just like this story is a snare to trap David in his sin, the letter to the Hebrews makes the point that the priestly temple sacrifice is for the purpose of pointing out sins. But it can never atone. It can never provide the inner healing it promises. Our own contemporary version of the sacrificial system is capital punishment that while it promises to relieve and heal the victim only has the effect of totalizing their pain while creating more victims.

But in Christ the familiar edifice of the sacrificial system has been so radically reinterpreted, we might say “transfigured” as to amount to something entirely new. This old house of sacrifice is a way for us to hide from ourselves our own iniquity and our oppression of the poor in our midst by approaching God thinking the heart of worship is something we give God, some offering. This is how Peter reacts at the Mt. Of the Transfiguration—he wants to build three booths, three tents one for Moses, one for Elijah and one for Jesus, so that sacrificial worship can be offered to them—but not until the resurrection would it be clear that the meaning of the vision is the transfiguration of sacrifice.

In fact the architect and pioneer builder of our salvation has opened a new model in a new development where everything is already provided for us. The sacrificial offering is no longer what we give God, it is what God has given us. This reversal means the language of sacrifice we use when we describe, for instance, the

Eucharistic meal needs to be parsed from back to front. We have received, grace upon grace, therefore we give. Ours is a sacrifice of thanksgiving. He has given his own body and blood once for all, therefore we offer bread and wine a sacrifice of thanksgiving.

This new house of sacrifice, accomplished by God on our behalf, includes us, has room for us as we listen to and follow Christ in self-offering love for all, especially those who hate us. And not in the old way of seeking through our futile offerings to wrest from God some good, what we think is best for us, but by desiring what God desires, receiving the unfailing treasure ahead of time, so that our new home today might be informed not so much by the one we've come from but by the one we wait for and treasure in our hearts by anticipation.

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