



The Sacrifice of Isaac, illustration, 14th century Pamplona Bible, commissioned by Spanish King Sancho VIII el Fuerte de Navarra.

Proper 8A

Genesis 22:1-14, Matthew 10:40-42

The Rev. Linda McConnell

Last Saturday, I took my grandchildren to see Wizard of Oz at ACT Theater in San Francisco.

Because it was Pride Weekend, we took BART so we wouldn't have to worry about parking. When we climbed the stairs up from the BART station, we suddenly emerged into the color and swirl of Pride Weekend, and smack into a group of street preachers all wearing MAGA look alike hats but that said JESUS were taking turns with a box and a microphone hooked up to a very loud speaker.

My daughter in law is also an Episcopal priest, and we quickly herded the children through the fire and brimstone. But a block later, my 7 year old grandson said “I wanted to stay and listen. They were telling some good stories.” Now he is not part of a church-going family - so the stories were new to him. (Don’t worry - he’s not my daughter in law’s son!)

The story we had walked into was Noah’s Ark, and the preacher was good. He embellished it with a full description of the water rising higher and higher and the panic of the people clinging to the sides of the boat, trying to clamber up to safety. Then the preacher moved on to Jesus’ parable of the man who built his house on sinking sand, and how the wind and the floods doomed that house and its inhabitants to oblivion. He had thoroughly captivated at least one listener. My grandson insisted that I tell him the whole story.

So you know how Noah’s Ark is a favorite for nursery decorations, wallpaper strips. I guess because it features animals and a boat. But it is a gruesome story. Winston was wide-eyed to hear the story of the rain coming down in sheets for days and everyone but Noah and his family drowned. Most animals too. It’s not a children’s story.

But you know me. I’m a preacher too. And a fairly decent storyteller. So I told the story, but with context - how the people were fighting with each other all the time, and even killing each other and tearing out orchards and vineyards so their enemies couldn’t eat. Eventually, all that brutality resulted in disaster for the people, the animals, and the land. He still liked the street preachers part about the people trying to climb up the boat. I said, well that’s not actually part of the story - but it does make it better doesn’t it?

But at that moment, on the streets of San Francisco, I began teaching him that stories can be told and used in very different ways, depending on your intent. He’s sophisticated, ok? Later when he related all this to his parents - who were not there - he said, “did you know that a story can have different meanings depending on how you tell it?”

That’s my lead into one of the questions I was asked recently: “How do you read the Bible? I picked up the Bible, this person said, and I read the first couple chapters of Genesis, and thought, what? All creation in seven days? Really?”

So let me give you my wisdom on this in a few minutes:

1) We are part of a long tradition which takes the bible seriously, and not literally. We do not take the Bible as coming directly to us from God's mouth - or an angel's mouth. It is a record of a people's interactions and experiences over time, with the Divine. It is certainly divinely inspired - and it is written by people who lived a long time ago. It has gone through many translations.

Thanks be to God, we are part of a spiritual heritage that wrestles with the text, like Israel wrestled with the angel. We don't say: "God said it. I believe it. That settles it." You've heard that saying right? "God said it. I believe it. That settles it." That's not us.

We understand that context is critical, that there are layers upon layers of meaning in every text and that as we grow in our spiritual journeys we also grow in our understanding of the various levels of meaning.

For instance, this troubling story about Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac. We can understand this as a story of trust, of putting ourselves and our children ultimately in God's hands.

We can understand this as a story that prefigures the Cross of Christ and the sacrifice of Jesus.

We can understand this as a story about God's rejection of the cultural practice of child sacrifice.

We can allow the text to read us - to ask us the hard questions of how we sacrifice our own children on the altar of getting ahead. How we sacrifice the children of the poor through an inability or unwillingness to re-organize our social and economic practices. How we sacrifice the resources of the earth to our desire for comfort and lack of imagination and concern for those who come after us.

Do you see? We take the bible seriously - but not literally. And we exercise our imagination rather than attempting to pin down the meaning, like entomologists pinning a dead butterfly to a setting board.

We also acknowledge that there is very little objectivity when it comes to the Bible - our

race, our class, our nationality, our gender, our sexual orientation, our cultural influences - sorry to be so woke right now - but these all make a difference in terms of what we hear and how we interpret what we hear.

2) My second and last point about reading the Bible: We read all of through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We read a LOT of scripture during our worship services - the Old Testament, the Psalms, the letters of the early church, and always a proclamation from the gospel.

We greet the gospel with some kind of Alleluia! We stand for the gospel. The deacon proclaims the gospel in our midst. Right? Why do we do that? Because of all the bible, we give the good news of Jesus first place. It is how we interpret all the rest of scripture - through the lens of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. Christ - The Lord of Love. The Lord of Peace. The Giver of Life.

Any interpretation that does not serve the Kingdom of Heaven, Christ's ultimate reign of Love and Peace and Light and Grace, should be suspect in your mind.

The street preacher in his red Jesus hat meant well - I'm sure. But in his fiery judgment of those with whom he disagreed he was off the mark.

And as this is my next to the last Sunday as your rector, I'm taking advantage of the question that was posed to me - to tell you that it is critical for us and for our children and for our nation and for our religion to be able to discern the difference so that we are not caught off guard or led astray by what Jesus called "wolves in sheep's clothing."

How will you know which is the wolf and which is the sheep - when the wolf is often more adroit at gaining an audience and a following? "By their fruits." Jesus said. And he gave us the criteria for good fruit. It is Love. Love for God and love for your neighbor as yourself.

Read the bible through that lens. Listen to preaching through that lens. Discern policy through that lens. What is the fruit and what is the intent? If it isn't love, it isn't God.

Ok - my friends. How blessed we are by the Spirit of Love and friendship. Amen.