

A Tale of Two Sermons: The Perils and Promise of Personal Narrative

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One of the most unforgettable sermons I ever heard was when I was in divinity school back in the early 90's and America had just gone to war with Iraq for the first time. The preacher had a prophetic passion for justice, and we expected that he would condemn our nation's use of force to a congregation that was somewhat open to his argument but by no means of one point of view on the subject. So we waited for what we expected from him, some of us waiting to hear our own opinions from the pulpit, make that our own opinions but better delivered, for he was an excellent preacher after all, and others were listening defensively with arms crossed as if to say "Ok, bring it on."

So we were surprised when he began not with a gospel passage about peace, but instead with the story of Abraham and Isaac. He laid out the familiar tale of God's call to Abraham to sacrifice his son on the altar, a story that makes many people of faith cringe even though we know it will end with Isaac living to see another day. But it makes us cringe because Abraham appears to be so brutal and to be frank, backwards. What kind of father would sacrifice a son for any cause? It's a story so disturbing it had become for me, as student of theology in my early twenties, irrelevant, a throw-back from a bloody and backwards era that I was grateful not to be a part of.

But then the preacher changed his tone and spoke about being a father himself of a young man who might be Isaac. He said that his son, now in college, was the age of most soldiers, and he talked about his fears for the young people who might be sent to war. His voice shook with emotion as he took us back into the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. Suddenly that story changed from a bizarre tale from a brutal culture long ago to a story that spoke to our nation in that moment. Would our sons be sacrificed? And upon what altar?

When the preacher got to the end of the story, when God calls upon Abraham to release Isaac, he referenced his own son once again and with angry tears in his eyes he said, "Here's what we learn from this story. God does not require the sacrifice of our sons!" and he ended the sermon right there. For the first time, I realized that this scripture was not so much about Abraham's actions as about God's action at the end. God did not desire the sacrifice of our young for any reason. And I imagined God weeping as our nation marched to war.

Had the preacher not told us that he was a father, had he not reflected upon what that role was like for him in very personal ways, that sermon would not have touched us in the same way. For me, as a young woman at that time not married and not a parent, his very personal story of being a middle aged father of a young man took me into the heart of Abraham in a way that had never before been possible, and dare I say it, took me into the heart of God. It was one of the most powerful sermons I have ever heard, and his personal passion as a parent, his story, and his testimony to what he believed about God were key.

Later, as we gathered for the Eucharist and I saw the gifts of God for the people of

God arranged on the altar, I gave thanks for the one true sacrifice in Christ that made new life possible. I realized as I stood at the railing that I will never again hear the story of Abraham and Isaac on the altar without thinking of that preacher and father fearing for his son, and it will always point me not to a brutal time far past, but to my own day and to those who are sacrificed on the altar of war that breaks God's heart, for I believe as he believed, that God does not desire the sacrifice of our young. That debt has been paid in Christ not so that such brutality can continue, but so that the prince of peace might reign instead. Brutality would not have the last word.

Life experience alone is meager fare for the task of gospel proclamation, but when life experience is enlarged to include the preacher's own personal experience of God or clear belief in God, the sermon can have great power. But such power unleashed can also manipulate. It can entertain too much, pruriently so, and distract us from God just when we might need her the most. And sometimes such stories can inflict pain and harm. Let me tell you about another sermon.

The church was dark and lit by candles for Maundy Thursday. The cold, crisp air had sent us rushing inside for a beautiful and familiar service that made Holy Week real for our small church community. The liturgy was somber and beautiful and toward the end, we waited as the pastor entered the pulpit for what was usually, on such occasions, a rather short homily. Instead of placing a sheaf of manuscript pages on the pulpit, as was his custom, this time he opened a crumpled envelope and announced that he was going to read us a letter he had just received from his wife who was also the co-pastor of the church. As he adjusted his reading glasses, he also wiped tears from his eyes and proceeded in a choked up voice to read us what was basically a "Dear John, I'm leaving you" letter.

This is what I recall coming from a trembling voice in the pulpit: "She wrote in this letter that was left for me this morning on the kitchen table, 'I have gone away for some time by myself. I'll be fine. Do not try to locate me or find out where I am. And no, I will not be here to co-officiate at any of the holy week or Easter services.'" As he went on to tell the congregation that his marriage had been in trouble for a while, some members of the church started to weep, as though they were small children just getting the news that their parents were going to get a divorce. First time visitors looked enormously uncomfortable. I heard a man turn to his wife and say "I've had it with this crazy church." That Maundy Thursday homily was full of personal narrative and also full of deep feeling and passion. I have no doubt that the preacher was leaning into the everlasting arms of Jesus in that painful and heartbreaking moment, but it was the worst excuse for a sermon I have ever heard.

Two sermons, both filled with personal narrative, testimony, and passion. One unforgettable, like a life changing epiphany. One unforgettable, like surgery without anesthesia. They are forever linked in my memory, representing both the promise and the peril of the practice. They are forever linked in my memory, because the same preacher delivered them both.