

Does God Provide?

Genesis 22:1-19 and Luke 22:47-53, 63-65

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In the decade after the end of World War II, work was started to rebuild Coventry Cathedral in England—that place that was destroyed by air bombardment during the war. They rebuilt a new, modern cathedral alongside the burned out shell of the old one. Two charred beams stand in the open air of the shell, forming a cross. A makeshift altar proclaims the words “Forgive them.” For the consecration of the new Coventry Cathedral, composer Benjamin Britten was commissioned to write a musical work for the occasion.

“*My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity.*” Those are the words of Wilfred Owen, a British army officer in the First World War. Owen died one week before the war ended. He was 25. Benjamin Britten used those words on the title page of the score for his *War Requiem*, a work that juxtaposes the Latin mass for the dead with Owen’s own poetry and was first performed in 1962 at the new Coventry Cathedral.

Included in his war poetry was the work “The Parable of the Old Man and the Young,” where Owen reflects on our Old Testament text—the Sacrifice of Isaac—in the light of the war that subsequently took his life.¹

Our subject today is war.
And the pity of war.
The poetry is in the pity.²

To talk about anything in church means we have to talk about God. To ask questions about war means we have to ask questions about our understanding about the character of God. To think about war and social justice, especially on Palm and Passion Sunday, we need to ask this fundamental question: Does God provide?

The first war mentioned in the Bible is just 13 chapters into Genesis. Wars are fought throughout the Old Testament, and Jesus grew up in a land of armed occupation, just as Paul traveled through a world ordered by the forced acquiescence of the power of Roman soldiers.

When the Bible talks about war, the most common way it is referred to is that kings and rulers made war. Today we declare war. We go to war. In the Bible, people made war. Who today would claim that? Who today wants to say they “make war”? War was complicated then as it is now. When Aristotle wrote his treatise on the nature of virtue, his model of courage was the soldier. The novelist E.M. Forster famously said that if he had to choose between betraying his country and betraying his friend, he hoped he would have the guts to betray his country.³

But for a soldier it’s usually a false distinction because soldiers in battle fight for their friends. When Jesus says, “Greater love has no one than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends,” soldiers know exactly what he’s talking about. You don’t hurl yourself into the line of fire in battle because you believe in freedom, justice, or the flag; you do it because you see your friends have been hit, and you can’t bear for

them to die. Soldiers bear witness to the world that there's something that matters more than self-preservation.

Wars are fought over matters of principle. Groucho Marx once said, "These are my principles; if you don't like them – I have others." Soldiers are a witness that some principles are worth dying for. Some principles are more important than life itself. A person who believes and embodies that is a person of integrity and courage.⁴

We cannot imagine a world without war. And so we believe in war. We believe in war! Sometimes it seems we believe in war more than we believe in God. We want to believe there's something more precious than life itself. Once a war begins, the lives of the fallen become their own irrefutable logic: this war must be about something more important than life, otherwise these beloved men and women would not be dead.⁵ War shows us depravity, ugliness, and horrifying cruelty; but it also raises our passion above the mundane. It gives a nation a reason for being, a moment to define itself, and a story to tell.⁶ At the Battle of Fredericksburg in 1862, Robert E. Lee said, "It's well that war is so terrible, otherwise we would grow too fond of it."

Do we believe that God will provide? Will God provide in all ways, in all places, and for all our needs? War is terrible. And in our time, the terror of war, along with the means used to fight "the war on terror" has been terrible.

Jesus was tortured. In this week that we observe beginning today, Jesus was tortured by Roman soldiers on the way to his death. His torture was not to elicit information or for the enemy to gain advantage. Presumably it was because Jesus was a threat. He was tortured the way all torture works—degrade the body to try to gain control of mind and soul. Our culture has become largely numbed to torture. Sydney Bristow, Jake Ballard, Carrie Matheson, Philip and Elizabeth Jennings, Liz Keen, Jack Bauer—these are characters, respectively, on TV shows *Alias*, *Scandal*, *Homeland*, *The Americans*, *Blacklist*, and, of course, *24* who regularly engage in torture in service of saving the world.

Torture, even though it is against the Geneva Convention, scores of international laws, United Nations resolutions, and our own Uniform Code of Military Justice, has become part of our national life in the last 15 years,⁷ aided and abetted by the vision of Jack Bauer saving the world one epic episode at a time by the degrading torture of another human being. The aim of torture is to break the body to gain control of the mind and soul of another. The thing is, as we have tortured, what has happened is what always happens: the ones who do the torturing and the nation that allows it degrade themselves and risk losing their soul.

Jesus was tortured. On the last week of his life, Jesus was spat upon, stripped, beaten, and humiliated. Unspeakable pain was inflicted upon him. And people watched. And they laughed. And they mocked—they mocked Jesus and they mocked his faith and they mocked his God. Jesus was entirely and completely vulnerable. More than that, he displayed that the character of God is best known through vulnerability. He showed us that weakness is strength. He risked everything to show us what life is. It is true that the aim of torture is to break the body in order to gain control of the mind and soul of another. In this week, Jesus offered his body, broken, that our minds and souls might be healed.

Do we believe God will provide? Do we believe that? Sometimes it seems we believe in war more than we believe in God. What if something else was true? What if we did believe something was truer than war? In Wilfred Owen's poem "The Par-

able of the Old Man and the Young,” Owen begins:

So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,
And took the fire with him, and a knife.
And as they sojourned both of them together,
Isaac the first-born spake and said,
“My Father, behold the preparations, fire and iron,
But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?”

Owen is building up to the moment where God offers the ram instead of Isaac. And Owen’s classical 14-line sonnet is rounded off with these words:

Lo! an angel called him out of heaven,
Saying, “Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
Neither do anything to him, thy son.
Behold! Caught in a thicket by its horns,
A Ram. Offer the Ram of Pride instead.”

The poignancy of the story of Abraham and Isaac is that Isaac utterly trusts Abraham and Abraham completely trusts God. Christians read this story in the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus. We see Jesus reflected in Isaac because we see Jesus’ complete trust in God and we see the sacrifice to which Jesus is put. We see Jesus also reflected in the ram, because unlike Isaac, Jesus really is sacrificed to the point of death. And when we use the word *sacrifice*, it is not intended to be an equation or a formula or some “blood atonement” theology of old. This is sacrifice as the fullest expression of God’s self-emptying love for us, seen in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Lamb of God whose sacrifice delivers us from death. Because of Jesus we can see ourselves as Isaac, bound to death but delivered by grace.⁸

And this is the Christian gospel. All the pointlessness and horror of human existence is drawn to the cross. The cross is what happens when unending love is seen by our limited human imagination, and we cannot tolerate it. The cross is humanity’s appalling reaction to the love of God. But the reason why the cross is good news is that the early church recognized it as the last sacrifice. The sacrifice of the Son of God is the sacrifice to end all sacrifice. So the war to end all wars was not the Civil War or the First or the Second World War; it was the cross. The good news of the cross is fundamentally that war is over.

At this point, the irony of Wilfred Owen’s poem becomes almost unbearable. Because the poem is a sonnet it ought to finish at the end of the fourteenth line,

Behold! Caught in a thicket by its horns,
A Ram. Offer the Ram of Pride instead.

What a perfect ending: “Offer the Ram of Pride instead.” Allow your pride to die and stop trying to make meanings, purposes, and glories for yourself that are greater than the ones God has given you. But the poem doesn’t stop there. Jarring the principles of poetry and the gospel, Owen somberly records what happened next:

But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

In Britten's *War Requiem*, those final words are repeated:

And half the seed of Europe, one by one.
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.⁹

Owen portrays the First World War as a rejection of the Christian gospel. He sees it as a declaration that sacrifice must continue because the sacrifice of Jesus is not enough. In other words, we're not clear we believe in God, but we know for sure that we believe in war. A culture of fear and a bankruptcy of trust believes that war makes us noble and gives us dignity and shows us truth—beyond any other dignity, beyond any other truth. God gives us the sacrifice that ends all war, and thus war becomes the most profound way we show our rejection of God.

The final irony of war lies one step further. Like irony in general, it has to be handled with care, because irony seems like an insult when one is living with the crucified hearts and loves and memories of war. For Christians, the problem with the weapons of war is fundamentally not that they're too strong, but that they're too weak. God has shown us how God goes about setting things straight. The way God redeems evil is not by responding in kind, but through self-giving, patient, open-hearted, risk-taking, non-resistant, vulnerable love. So it's not that war is so powerful that it's more powerful than God. It's that war is a failed attempt to establish our own meaning, when God has already given us the world's meaning in Jesus' death and resurrection.

The saddest day in modern American history was September 12, 2001.¹⁰ The previous day the nation suffered a grievous blow. What took place went to the core of our common life and made us search desperately for meaning, personally and collectively. The following day was a defining moment for our nation and our sense of God and our place in the world. Would the cross be followed by resurrection? Would the sacrifice of the cross be seen as the end of sacrifice? Would America and its friends show the world that they believed in God more than they believed in war? In Owen's words, would we not "slaughter the lamb of pride instead"? We know the answer. We came out all guns blazing. Like the old man in Wilfred Owen's poem, *we would not so, and slew our offspring*. And half the promises of God, one by one.

Does God provide? It is the essential question for our life of faith. It is the essential question for our church. It is the essential question as we enter into Holy Week. It is the essential question as we are so immersed in our culture of fear. Does God provide? That is such a risky question! It is risky because if the answer is no (which is often our lived answer to the question), then we get war and poverty and racism and conflict and exclusion. It is a risky question because if the answer is yes, then we are totally exposed, and we are so prone to be seized by fear, and we are so vulnerable, and we have nothing to do but completely trust that with God, weakness leads to strength...and the cross leads to resurrection.

Notes

1 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/War_Requiem, accessed March 15, 2015.

2 Much of the theme and direction of this sermon owes substantial debt to two sermons by Sam Wells, one preached at Duke Chapel in 2007 (“The Pity of War”) and one preached during Mid-Winters Lectures at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary (untitled) in 2011.

3 E.M. Forster and Nicolas Walter, *What I Believe and Other Essays* (London: GW Foote, 1999).

4 Sam Wells again, in the above referenced sources and in other general writings. Our debt to him is substantial in forming our approach to this sermon.

5 Gary Wills, “Essay on War and Making War,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, c. 2005.

6 Chris Hedges, *War Is the Force That Gives Us Meaning* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2002).

7 We are grateful to one of our church members, retired Air Force Brigadier General Jerome Jones for his conversations with us on the subject of torture and warfare.

8 Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

9 This interpretation connecting Owen’s poetry with the Abraham/Isaac narrative was first introduced to one of us (Mark) in lectures by Dr. Nathan Scott in an English and Religion seminary at the University of Virginia in 1978.

10 This sentiment has been expressed by numerous sources, including Richard Rohr and Wendell Berry.