

The Faith of Jesus in a Pluralistic World, Part 6 God's Altar v. The World's Altar

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Scripture: Genesis 22:1-19; 1 Samuel 15:22-24; Romans 4:1-5; Qur'an 37:100-112

This is quite a significant Sunday in the life of both our partner communities on the Tri-Faith Commons. For the Muslims, it is the highest, happiest, most sacred holiday of the year: *Eid al-Adha*. For the Jews, it is the saddest, most tragic holiday of the year, called *Tisha B'Av*.

Since Islam follows a strictly lunar calendar, the exact month and date of *Eid al-Adha* can vary quite a bit. The Jewish calendar is luni-solar, meaning that the months follow the moon but the year is marked by the sun. Its date can vary, too, but only by a couple of days or weeks. Therefore, it is quite rare that both holidays are celebrated on the same weekend. As Christians on the Tri-Faith Commons, we can't miss an opportunity like this to learn something about our two partners. And about Jesus. For, if you really grasp the significance of *Eid al-Adha* and *Tisha B'Av*, it is quite likely that you will grasp the significance of Jesus better than ever.

This is what I love about our relationship with the Jewish and Muslim communities. By understanding what it means to be Jewish and Muslim, we learn what it means to be truly Christian.

Let's look at the "happy" holiday before turning to the "sad" one. *Eid al-Adha* commemorates an event that is considered sacred to all three of the Abrahamic faiths – so really, we should be celebrating, too. It marks the time when Abraham believed that God had called him to sacrifice his beloved son and God provided a ram at the last moment as an alternate sacrifice. It is considered happy because, despite the terrifying nature of what Abraham was asked to do, he trusted and obeyed God completely, as did his son who consented to being sacrificed (at least, according to the Qur'an). Of course, it is also happy because God did not actually want Abraham's son to be sacrificed and provided a ram in his place. From this time on, human sacrifice was de-legitimized and went into decline to the point where, today, we find the mere notion of it repugnant.

Muslims celebrate this holiday by gathering for worship, as they did at 9 this morning at the American Muslim Institute. Families also purchase a sheep, lamb, goat, camel, or cow – one that is without blemish of any sort – and either sacrifice it themselves or have it sacrificed. The meat is divided into three portions which are given to the family, to friends, and to the poor. When I was at the AMI yesterday, they had lists of local farmers and ranchers from whom they could purchase animals for this ritual. Alternatively, Muslims are encouraged to give money instead of food if the intended recipient of the sacrifice is in debt. You might also call this the "vegetarian" option!

Now, you may be wondering which son Abraham was asked to sacrifice to God, as he had two. The first son, Ishmael, was born through Sarah's handmaid, Hagar. Islam traces its lineage through Ishmael. Most Muslims believe he is the one God asked Abraham to sacrifice, though

the Qur'an does not mention the son by name. The second son, Isaac, was born through Sarah herself. Judaism traces its lineage through Isaac, and they believe Isaac was who God asked Abraham to sacrifice, as it states in Genesis.

Which child was truly the subject of the story is more than a *tom-AY-toe* versus *tom-AH-toe* question to Muslims and Jews, but for our purposes this morning, the significance of the story is the same either way. I suggest we honor both traditions this morning by celebrating the MUSLIM holiday with the JEWISH boy as the subject.

According to the story, God decided to test Abraham's faith one day. This, perhaps, should come as no surprise. After all, ever since God had called Abraham and Sarah to move to a new land where God would establish their progeny as a great and mighty nation, through whom the world would be blessed, they have doubted the promise and tried to take matters into their own hands. Ishmael is a case in point. The promise was that Sarah would give birth to this child, but in Abraham and Sarah's opinion, God was naïve. Sarah was barren, and far too old to bear a child. At 90 or 91 years old, you might be inclined to agree! So, the couple took matters into their own hands. Abraham slept with Sarah's handmaid, Hagar, to produce an offspring. This isn't what God had in mind. In due time, Sarah gave birth to Isaac, which means "he laughs" – a name given to the couple by the angels who came to deliver the promise to them, reflecting the fact that Sarah laughed at the audacity of the promise. It was like saying, "You think this promise is funny? I'll tell you what's funny: a naïve mortal who thinks that God is the naïve one!"

For this failure of faith and many others, God apparently decides to test Abraham. Most people assume that the test is a test of *faith*, or, Abraham's trust in God. In part, this is exactly right. In order to comply with God's request, Abraham would need to trust that God would still make good on the promise to create a great nation from Isaac's descendants even though he was being asked to sacrifice him on an altar in the wilderness. Many rabbinic commentators over the years have suggested that the real faith that was being tested was not just Abraham's faith in God, but his faith in resurrection from the dead. Kill Isaac, and God will raise him up again.

Whatever the case, Abraham follows through on the request. He brings Isaac out to the wilderness with wood and fire to make a sacrifice. But when Isaac asks where the sacrificial animal is, Abraham says, "You are it." At this point, the Jewish and Muslim versions of the story diverge. According to Genesis, Abraham immediately bound Isaac with a rope and set him on the firewood they'd brought. The fact that he bound Isaac may suggest that Isaac wasn't as keen on the vision as Abraham was. In the Muslim story, Abraham shares the vision with his son as soon as he has it. His son willingly gives his consent, showing them both to be the epitome of complete obedience.

However, at the last moment, as Abraham has his knife raised to slit his son's throat, God directs Abraham's attention to a ram caught in a thicket, insisting that Abraham sacrifice the ram, not the boy. Abraham is all-too-happy to comply.

What does this strange story tell us about God? The more perplexing question is what the story tells us about US. The fact that God produced an alternate sacrifice at the last moment

clearly shows that God never intended that Abraham sacrifice his child. What kind of Loving God would ever ask a person to sacrifice his own child? The answer is clearly, “Not Abraham’s God.”

So, why did God ask in the first place? God asked because there were two tests going on, not one. The first was a test of faith and obedience, which Abraham passed with flying colors. But the second was about what you do with your faith – the “How, then, shall we live?” question. Abraham failed this test. Failed it miserably because sacrificing children is absolutely not in alignment with the way of life God wants for us (and our children!).

What would it look like to pass God’s test? Abraham should have pushed back. He should have told God, “I am willing to give you everything you ask for, including my own son. But I am not willing to kill him. He’s yours. So, if it’s important to you that he die, then you’ll have to do it yourself.”

Abraham may have passed the test of faith with flying colors but he failed the test of life by drawing the knife with the intention of slitting his own son’s throat.

What this story tells us is that God is not the enemy when it comes to atrocities committed in God’s name. We are. We are the enemy when we commit acts of murder and other violence against each other.

Through this story, God effectively says, “Don’t blame me if you happen to get an idea in your head that I would really want to kill one of my own creations. That’s on *you*. From now on, you will *know* this to be true since I provided an alternate sacrifice. I am your *friend*. I would never ask you to actually carry out something so horrible, cruel, and ungodly.”

Just to put this story in perspective, before Abraham it was a common assumption in many religions that their god would occasionally demand a human sacrifice in order for the community to prosper. After Abraham, human sacrifice went into decline to the point where, today, we can hardly conceive of any god asking this of their followers. Yet sacrifice of this kind was the basic assumption in Abraham’s day.

Centuries later, the prophet Samuel would articulate well the faith of Israel and her God:

"Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obedience to the voice of the Lord? Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed [God's command is better] than the fat of rams."

(1 Samuel 15:22)

II. The World’s Altar

Do you think that Jesus was a student of Abraham? Do you think it really mattered to him what Abraham did and did not do? If you believe that Jesus was purely God, then Abraham’s life and faith had exactly zero influence on him. After all, Jesus would have been aware of everything he needed to know without being taught by a single human being.

If Jesus was both divine and human, mortal as orthodox Christianity has claimed, then it truly matters when and where he was born, and into what culture. It matters because he may not have been FORMED by Jewish culture, but he was certainly INFORMED by it. He studied and learned from the beliefs and practices of Judaism on such a deep level that he came to know its true essence. Jesus preached Judaism's true essence in the only way it could be received and understood by those to whom he preached – using *Jewish* symbols, stories, metaphors, and thought forms. The only way to fully understand what Jesus said and taught is to understand both his teachings and actions within a *Jewish* framework.

So yes, Jesus was absolutely a student of Abraham. The sacrifice Jesus makes of himself on the Cross as God's beloved son is very much intended to echo the near-sacrifice of Abraham's beloved son.

Many Christians who don't know Judaism very well believe that, in order for God to bring salvation to the world, God needed to sacrifice God's own Son on the Cross in order that all who believe in him might be washed clean by the blood of his sacrifice. The exact opposite is the case. God did not need to kill Jesus in order to make us holy.

It was God's will that Jesus offer himself as a sacrifice on the Cross. But it is absolutely NOT God's will that we would follow through with the sacrifice, just as it was NOT God's will that Abraham sacrifice Isaac (or Ishmael).

Do you see what's going on here with the parallelism between Abraham and Isaac/Ishmael's story, and that of God and Jesus? God asked Abraham to place his beloved son on God's altar, which turned out to be the safest place in the entire Universe that Abraham's beloved could have been. He was perfectly safe there. Now, with Jesus, God is returning the message. God is placing Jesus on THE WORLD's altar saying, in effect, "What will you do with this? Have you learned anything about who I am and how I operate?" Just as Abraham's faith in God was being tested when God asked Abraham to lay his son on God's altar, so God's faith in us was being tested when God set Jesus on the world's altar. Would God take the same risk that God asked Abraham to take?

The answer is, "Yes." God passed the test of God's faith in US by offering Jesus as a sacrifice. And we failed the test by acting according to our human identity rather than our divine one. We did not provide an alternate sacrifice when God set His beloved Son before us as a sacrifice as God. We went through with the sacrifice even though God had clearly provided an alternative example when Abraham presented his beloved son to God. Like Abraham before us, we demonstrated that we are perfectly willing to go through with the sacrifice by nailing Jesus to the Cross.

We killed Jesus, not God. We are the ones to blame, not God. By raising Jesus from the dead, God proves that it was never God's intention for Jesus to die. It was our intention, and ours alone. Yet, in raising Jesus from the dead, God also proves that God does not even hold this great sin against us, just as God did not hold Abraham's sin against him. Because Jesus still lives, we are continually offered the choice – in every generation since Jesus – to abstain from the basic human instinct to destroy that which God offers us, and to blame God for the violent impulse that is actually our own.

Over the entire course of my ministry, the most frequent question I have been asked is, “How can a loving God allow such evil to exist in our world?” Yet, if you see the world through the lens of the two altars, you see that this question should be reversed. We humans love to see ourselves as kind, gentle, lovers of justice and peace, yet God has given us a world where all the necessary tools for making peace – and many more besides – have been given to us. If we honestly care about our neighbor, there is more than enough food to go around; more than enough shelter; more than enough ability to offer education and healthcare to the world, and more than enough land to inhabit. So the real question is: “How can we human beings allow so much evil to exist in the world when we have been given more than enough means to put an end to the worst of it? And why do we continually blame our Creator for our own shortcomings?”

The Jewish holiday that is commemorated today, speaks to the state of affairs that exists when God places good and beautiful things on the world’s altar. *Tisha B’Av* is a holiday that commemorates the destruction of the first great Jewish Temple by the Babylonians, which is said to have happened on this very day in 586 BCE. It also commemorates the destruction of the extraordinary Second Temple at the hands of the Romans in 70 CE, which is also said to have happened on this day. *Tisha B’Av* further commemorates the start of the Spanish Inquisition – instigated by Christians – which is said to have started on this very day. And it commemorates Kristallnacht and the Holocaust – also at the hands of Christians – both of which are also said to have started today. In other words, *Tisha B’Av* commemorates the great tragedies that have taken place throughout history to the very people through whom God chose to bless the world.

Whether or not these events actually commenced on this day is beside the point. They happened, and they all speak to the same basic sin: when God places God’s sons and daughters on the altar of the world, we effectively crucify Jesus again and again.

No, God’s altar is the safest place in the world to find yourself. The world’s altar is the most dangerous place. The question that the Muslim celebration of *Eid al-Adha* and the Jewish commemoration of *Tisha B’Av* both confront us with is, “Will you place yourself and other children of God on God’s altar, or the altar of the world?” The choice is yours and mine to make. God will accept either action. But only one is godly. The other is satanic. One action leads to life, and the other to death.

More than ever, we need to heed the message of *Eid al-Adha* and *Tisha B’Av*. Will we place the poor and vulnerable of the world on God’s altar or our own? Will we place the very earth and its ecosystems on God’s altar, or our own? Clearly, the world as a whole chooses the world’s altar over God’s. But the question to you and me is: Which altar will you use? Will you place your faith in God, or humanity? Will yours be a happy life of faith and obedience or a sad one where you destroy the very gifts God lays before you and blame God for never giving you enough?