

# Sacrifice

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Once again, it's good to be together, whether here in person or online. Here I'm starting the gospel reading and Pastor Bridget is mumbling under her breath (I can't figure out what); it turns out she's so well-trained, she's saying all the responses to the liturgy! You are just like a model for the rest of us. Pastor Susan and I...I don't know. Okay, I better be quiet. I will say silent.

I want to start out my sermon today with *on the one hand*. On the one hand, it's amazing how far we've come in the last two years on our pandemic journey. I mean, think about it: in these past two years, there have been the development of vaccines that—even if they don't totally prevent someone from getting Covid—they do protect mightily against severe disease and death. Think about the different therapeutics that have been developed so that, if you do have Covid and are going to the hospital, there are treatments available now.

Thinking about the helpful patterns of behavior that we've learned and—even in this time of not mandates so much but more personal choice—we are caring for each other, looking out for one another. Wearing masks or staying home if we're not feeling well, handwashing, checking in with people about how comfortable they are. Can I get up close? Can I hug you? Should we just fist bump?

All these things are new patterns of behavior that we've learned on this pandemic journey. These past two years, we've adapted here at church, too. Most of our meetings (many of them at

least) are on Zoom. We now have the option for people to be in the sanctuary or, if they're not quite comfortable, they could participate in worship wherever they have an electronic device. We've come a long way these past two years. And yes, *true*, we still have a long way to go, but it has been quite an amazing journey. One that—at least a couple of times during the week—I can't help just sitting and taking a moment and pondering: where we've been and the steps that we've taken along the way.

In the first reading that Bill brought to us this morning, Isaiah picks up on that desire to ponder journeys past. And here we are thinking (at least in this part of Isaiah) about the Exodus. God's people are pondering all those great, amazing things that God has done in the past: remembering God's work to split the sea, to free the slaves, to extinguish Pharaoh's army like a candle wick. What a great thing, especially when you've been on a long journey, and you're unsure about what your next step is going to be. What an amazing thing it is to stop and ponder some of the great things God has already done.

I've got to say, today Isaiah has a different take on this idea of pondering. It can be something very simple, like Isaiah saying to us, *Stop it! Stop pondering the past. Stop it! I've got a word to say to you, and that is that God is about to do a new thing. Do not remember the former things.*

*I'm about to do a new thing, Isaiah says. Now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it? And what gets in the way of perceiving the new? We're only focused on the past. So, Isaiah has this wonderful invitation: look just beyond today. Not too far, just beyond today and lean into God's amazing new*

*thing. It's arriving. Don't you see it? It's just coming down the track. Be ready for it.*

Think about when your parents moved out of your childhood, home: all the familiarity of it, all the memories. Some good memories and maybe some not so good, but it's a familiar place that you sort of always want to return to. This is kind of like Isaiah going, *No, you're not coming home anymore because I, your parent, just bought a condo, and we're downsizing and we're moving in there. You can make some new memories in that place. We'll even give you the code to the gate.*

*No, I don't want you to move into the condo!*

Isaiah says we're doing a new thing.

Now, it can be hard sometimes to see and difficult to believe—and even more difficult to align ourselves with—this new thing that God is doing. And that brings me to, on the other hand. We started out, *on the one hand*: you've made a lot of progress in our pandemic journey. *On the other hand*, there are some things that we are not quite ready for yet.

Pandemic has made us wary of trusting that tomorrow might be different; God forbid, it might even be better. The pandemic has greeted us with stops and starts; hopes and dashed hopes.

New things?! How can I put my trust in a new thing when I'm still dealing with the old thing! This stuff we have been through that has left us tired and cranky and brought us a lot of death.

**Almost a million people now**—and that's probably an

undercount—have died of Covid in the United States in the past two years. *Almost a million.* There's been a whole lot of death, and I don't think we've quite come to grips with that yet. And so, to turn to a new thing? What are you asking us to do, God?

It was brought home to me just this past Friday night when Kirsten and I went out. It's our habit that, when we go out, sometimes we like a good dive bar. (Also, what happens when we go out and sit together and talk and laugh, is that people come up because they want to talk to her. Me, not so much.)

So, we were sitting at a dive bar and this older gentleman comes up. You can tell, just from the look on his face, that these last couple of years have been tough. He had this sort of sarcastic manner about him.

It had been a hard time for him. He lost his job about six months ago. He had filed a grievance with the union and the grievance hadn't been picked up; it wasn't being supported. You could just tell that he couldn't figure out how to turn toward tomorrow. He was sort of stuck back there, and there was this cranky, unhealthy edge to it.

In my brain, I call it the Sarcastic White Privilege Guy. He just kept saying, *What white privilege?! I lost my job! There was no privilege.* I was like, *Dude, okay. I'm sorry, but we got apples and oranges going on here. You got to align yourself with something hopeful.* So, I was glad that the band started playing because that just sort of cut out all conversation, and I didn't have to move forward. He has having a hard time aligning himself; there was no new thing for him. Hard times.

There are those people who, in hard times, seem to be able to see tomorrow: *this new thing that God is doing*. There are those people, and I kind of relate to them as models. They are the one ones who—by their actions—bring us closer to that which is good and true and right. Or maybe I should say, by their actions they bring what is good and true and right closer to us: that new thing God is doing.

I can't help but think about some of the stories that are coming out of the Ukraine, especially in terms of all the different relief organizations—both in the religious realm and the non-religious realm—who are coming together to work to keep people alive. To assist with refugees. Those who are resisting the invasion or, may I say, even fighting to repel it. All good things to be aligned with, to be committed to. Why are they doing this? **It's because they have some hope that tomorrow a new thing is going to happen.** It's going to be a good thing and they want to be aligned with it through their actions.

I think about healthcare workers and teachers. People who have kept on going these last two years, because they know that tomorrow health is going to be important. Kids are going to be important. They want to get ready for that new thing that is going to happen, and they've sacrificed a lot by their actions to lean into that better tomorrow. They've sacrificed a lot.

With Lent coming to an end and Holy Week beginning next week, I began to ponder this idea of sacrifice, especially Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. I begin to kinda dig down again about what the biblical understanding of sacrifice really is. It's common amongst a lot of followers of Jesus to think about

sacrifice—and Jesus on the cross—as being this attempt to buy God off in some way, to somehow appease God's anger. And yet, I don't think that really captures what Jesus is all about or what *we* might be called to be about in terms of our own lives of sacrifice.

Let me lay this on you; see if this resonates with you at all. One of my professors once talked about sacrifice as a human action, that—when it's given over to God and blessed by God's grace—becomes a moment when God's peace and justice, God's *Shalom* can touch the earth. It can kiss the earth through our actions, become present in the world. That's what sacrifice really is: it's heaven and earth kissing through God's divine grace and human action.

Think about that. How different an understanding of sacrifice that is than trying to buy God off or appease some angry God somewhere. It's humans offering themselves and invoking God's grace—being blessed by the presence of God—and somehow a little goodness and truth and beauty and wholeness starts to take hold in the world. That is different. That is more like what's going on for some folks in Ukraine, or amongst our teachers or healthcare workers. That's it. They're doing it to *somehow* bring a little wholeness into a time that has a lot of brokenness.

My dad used to say it this way when he would talk about why he joined the army at the age of 17. He said, *I didn't join the army to go to France and die. I joined the army that there might be a better tomorrow.* He said this in 1943. It sort of put a frame around his journey as a young man, making an offering of sacrifice in his life.

Jesus' journey to Jerusalem is much the same. He doesn't go there to die—oh, he has no illusion about what might happen—but really, if you think about the garden, his intent is not to die, but to bring a better tomorrow for all of us. If he has to sacrifice his life to do bring about that better tomorrow, he chooses to align himself with God and God's will.

So we pick up on his journey today in our gospel reading. It's a strange little moment on that journey to Jerusalem. John reports to us in the gospel that there's a gathering of friends at Bethany, all friends of Jesus. Martha is there serving, and Mary is there anointing his feet. Lazarus is back from four days of sitting with death in a cold tomb, Jesus is six days away from his last supper, and Judas is just sitting there complaining about the whole thing.

But in the midst of his complaints, Mary just begins to offer an action: this anointing of the feet. She sees in Jesus one who was drawing all things and all people into God's *Shalom*, God's peace wrapped with justice. She sees the new thing that God is doing in Jesus, and she wants to honor that. His feet that have walked this path of *Shalom*? She wants to honor them. She also wants to honor the sacrifice that she knows is coming with her own sacrifice: 300 days of wages. Think about that. 300 days of wages for a common laborer is her sacrifice. 300 denari. Judas? Not so much. What he wants to honor is something not aligned with God's *Shalom*.

I've been wondering this past week, what will be *our* sacrifice, *our* human action that, combined with God's grace, brings a little bit of wholeness to the world?

In our time—as we begin ever so slowly to look forward, to what is going to be a *really* different future than what we've known in the past—what will be our sacrifice to align ourselves with this new thing God is doing among us? I ask that without having really any ideas yet. But I wonder if—*together*—we might be able to figure that out a little bit, as God's people right here at Messiah begin to have conversation with one another.

What's our sacrifice of alignment in order to bring a little wholeness to the world?

What are we going to honor, and can we see the new thing that God is doing in our midst?

We sacrificed for it: with joy, with love, with dedication. If these past two years have taught me anything as one of your pastors, it is that *that* is the heart of Messiah. Just taking a deep breath, coming to a little dinner party of our own, and getting ready to go forward. I think it's what it's all about.

Thanks be to God  
Together, we say: Amen.