



Sacrifice

Each month worship, religious education, community outreach ministry, covenant groups and Wellspring Wednesday programs will offer opportunities to contemplate, consider, contend with and discuss an intergenerational curriculum based on monthly themes. Our hope is that this approach will bind us more closely together and inform our lives in effective and positive ways. October's theme is...Sacrifice

It's hard to find the right path to approach the theme of sacrifice. My 21st century sensibilities will not allow me to follow Abraham to the mountaintop with his fire and knife in hand as he prepared, on God's command, to sacrifice his own son Isaac.

If I am to gain entry into the biblical concept of sacrifice at all, I must back up in Abraham's story to an earlier moment when God instructed him to pack up, leave his home and kin and travel to an unknown land. For in this command, I begin to understand the mythic nature of Abraham's covenant with his God, a covenant that demanded faith in the larger, often unseen narrative in which the Israelites lived. And it is in the context of this covenant that the Judaic practice of sacrifice was defined.

Biblical sacrifices were understood as a connection between heaven and earth, a human effort to give back a portion of the gift of life granted by God. However, the Latin root of the word reminds us that "sacrifice" is not so much about giving something up as it is about making something sacred (*sacre*: sacred + *facere*: to make). And what gives a sacrifice the power to make something sacred, for the ancient Israelites as well as for many of us today, is its service of a higher purpose or a greater good.

So it is that while the bible includes many instructions on proper burnt sacrifices, a few passages stand out as overriding these with a greater command from God. "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice," says one such passage, "the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." This "steadfast love" and "knowledge of God" called the Israelites into relationship with a greater purpose, with a longer arc of meaning. "To love," we are reminded by a more contemporary writer, "is to know the sacrifices which eternity exacts from life."

My paternal grandparents both emigrated from Germany. Each arrived alone, a teenager carrying a single suitcase. Each, like Abraham, left behind family, homeland, first language and the familiarity that now fills my own life as the air that I breathe and the inheritance my grandparents passed on to me. Their story is but one of millions around the world replete with evidence of immigrants' great sacrifices, of all that they relinquish in the pursuit of a future unseen and possibilities unproven. The immigrant story is not just about material loss but, perhaps more significantly, about the larger sacrifice of certainty that occurs when stepping onto the shifting ground of unfamiliar culture, language, customs and rules.

The immigrant's experience, then, illuminates one of the key points of sacrifice, which is the demand that we leave our known world behind. That we willingly accept the uncertainty that comes from stepping forward out of hope and faith – as we do in steadfast love – not mindlessly but with our minds and hearts and lives hitched to something bigger.

This is no small matter for us in the 21st century. As Margaret Mead observed, the accelerating pace of change has essentially made immigrants of us all, new arrivals in a world that is neither the one we were born into, nor even the one we inhabited ten years ago. So if the larger test of a sacrifice is that we are commanded to leave behind our own certainty and the comfort of knowing, there is great relevance for us today. Not just technologically but environmentally and in a global realignment toward equality, we are being asked to step into a larger stream with currents not of our own making. To learn new languages and customs in the journey toward justice. To offer our lives up to new ways and new

rules on the path toward peace.

"Even though you offer your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them," God says in another prophetic passage. "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

Immigrants one and all, may we learn to sacrifice the sure ground of the injustices we know too well and risk uncertain terrain as we travel toward the new land of beloved community.

— Karen Hering,
Assistant Literary Minister

Worship Theme Resources

FILMS

Rope — A 1948 Arthur Hitchcock film about two young men who try to carry out the perfect murder. Brandon Shaw and Phillip Morgan think themselves above the fray. They believe that ordinary morality does not apply to them. For them, the taking of life is the prerogative of the elite.

Glory (1989) — Robert Gould Shaw was a Unitarian who was born and raised in Boston, Massachusetts in 1837. He died in 1863 in South Carolina after leading the 54th Regiment, one of the first regiment of black soldiers, in a on Fort Wagner on the 18th of July. Matthew Broderick, Denzel Washington and Morgan Freeman star in this truly inspiring dramatization of a powerful moment in American history.

Stranger Than Fiction (2006) — Harold Crick doesn't want to die. Crunching numbers for the IRS and strictly regimenting his personal life has not fulfilled his goals for joy and happiness. When Harold finds himself trapped within the story of his own life, he seeks the most unlikely mode of escape.