

Second Sunday of Lent
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Let's be honest: the story of the binding of Isaac, which is the first reading for today, is strange and disturbing. I used to teach it quite often, and my favorite interpretation of it, which I've [elaborated elsewhere](#), is a 1655 etching by the great Dutch artist Rembrandt. The etching is entitled "The Sacrifice of Abraham," not Isaac, and that title is entirely accurate: as Rembrandt depicts the story, Isaac is born to new life, but Abraham has been crushed by the trauma to which God subjected him.

Some scholars argue that the point of the story comes, fittingly, at its end, when the merciful angel intervenes to stop Abraham from killing Isaac. On this interpretation, the story's point is to reject the practice of child sacrifice and thereby to differentiate Judaism from other Near-Eastern religions in which child sacrifice was appallingly common.

Christians have traditionally understood Isaac as a "type" of Christ: on this understanding, Abraham's apparent willingness to sacrifice his beloved son prefigures Christ's sacrifice on the cross. The second reading, from the letter to the Romans, suggests this interpretation when Paul writes that God "did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all." Yet the parallels between God and Abraham, and Jesus and Isaac, can be pushed too far. If God is three persons in one substance, as the Church fathers formulated the mystery of the Trinity in the philosophical vocabulary of late antiquity, or in other words if Jesus is God incarnate, then the death of Isaac would be parallel to the death of Jesus only if the death of Isaac *was also* the death of Abraham. The critical point is that Jesus' death on the cross was an event in the life of God, so to speak. In a sense at least, God died there, as God lived among us in the person of Jesus.

Strange and disturbing though it is, the story of the binding of Isaac does strike one theme that is at the core of Christianity: redemption comes through sacrifice. This theme can be easily cheapened, for example in the belief that if I "give up" this or that for Lent, then I am that much closer to heaven. Maybe I am, but surely that's the case only if my fasting leads me to become less inclined to indulge myself and more capable of "being there" for others.

I propose Martin Luther King, Jr. as another "type" for Christ—not prefiguring him, but modeled after him in an essential respect. I've long found King's "[Mountaintop Speech](#)," delivered in Memphis the night of April 3, 1968, the day before King was murdered, both profoundly moving and a helpful way into the Christian mystery. It seems that King knew he was going to die soon, or at least was aware of the real danger to his life. But he didn't flee; he didn't withdraw from public life. That would have been to betray the civil rights movement to which he had dedicated himself. Instead, he sacrificed himself to it: he gave his life that others might live.

The comparable moment in Jesus' life was in the garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus prayed before his arrest. Jesus might have slipped away under cover of night, out of Jerusalem and into the desert, but that would have been a betrayal of his followers. Imagine what would have

happened to the new “way” of life that he embodied and preached, which had roused the Temple authorities against him and brought him under the watchful eyes of the Romans. The transfiguration recounted in Mark’s gospel would have been rendered meaningless. To Jesus, God’s will was clear, and Jesus accordingly emptied himself on the cross. In the Easter event, death proved not to be the last word; “rising from the dead” took on meaning.

The question I put to myself is: Where in my own life is sacrifice called for so that I might live more fully and be more alive to the needs of others? Perhaps that is a question that also makes sense for you. Otherwise put: What am I holding onto that holds me back? What about me needs to be “given up” so that I can have myself back from old wounds and entrenched habits? What do I need to “offer up” for the grace of healing from the God who is creator, redeemer, and sustainer? The cross, paradoxically, is a symbol of hope. The last word isn’t death and negativity and darkness. As in the story of the binding of Isaac, there are merciful angels at the story’s end.