

“The forgotten sacrifice”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Trigger warning: today’s sermon discusses some topics that may be triggering to those who have experienced violence.

Last week, a man, shouting “I want to kill all Muslims,” plowed his van into a crowd outside of a mosque in north London, injuring 10 people and killing one. Authorities believe the culprit committed this act of terrorism out of revenge for recent terrorist attacks in England. And so it goes: round and round the terror carousel we go. You hurt me, I hurt you.

Only, it’s not as simple as that, is it? Because the Muslims this man targeted weren’t responsible for the earlier attacks. They had no affiliation with the terrorist organization known as the Islamic State. In fact, they were probably among the many Muslims who had protested the attacks. The man he killed was no terrorist. He was a father of six and grandfather of two, who enjoyed walks in the park and was about to take a vacation to Canada. He had immigrated to Britain when he was 10 years old. He wasn’t even from the Middle East. He was from Bangladesh.

But that didn’t matter to our killer. He couldn’t get to the actual culprits, so he unleashed his rage on whomever he could.

Violence—it’s the one thing in this world that actually does trickle down. Trickles all the way down to the most vulnerable.

Men who feel powerless in their jobs beating their wives and children. Kids who feel small inside bullying other kids who are small outside. Poor white people oppressing poor people of color. People shooting up baseball games, movie theaters, and night clubs.

An interminable cycle of violence, a perpetual sacrifice of whoever’s weaker than us, a bloody sibling rivalry, trickling down, down, down to all the children, all the homeless, all the innocent bystanders, all the people just trying to get home to their families. Muslims, Christians, Jews, all sons of Abraham righteously killing each other.

This, I imagine, is how the binding of Isaac must look to those who are silenced in our story today: Isaac’s mother Sarah, the slave woman Hagar, and Ishmael, the *other* son. Last week, we looked at this story from the perspective of Abraham, a father who chooses to vulnerably hold onto love and face the worst pain imaginable, all at the chance to walk hand in hand with his beloved son. However, I doubt Sarah, Hagar, and Ishmael saw it that way.

What they probably saw was a history of sacrifice.

News of the binding of Isaac wouldn't have surprised Hagar. Abraham, after all, was willing to sacrifice *their* son, Ishmael. He sent them out into the desert with only a day's worth of food and water—a death sentence. And let's not forget that Hagar is Abraham's slave, and so when he fathers a child by her, that can mean only one thing: he raped her.

Ishmael is the child of that violence, abandoned by his father. He doesn't even get three days of walking with his dad; he's just booted out the door.

Neither Hagar nor Ishmael have any say in the matter—just as Sarah never gets a chance to voice her decision before Abraham strolls off to kill their only son. Abraham doesn't even tell her what he's going to do. She who waited so long for joy, who endured infertility, has no opportunity to protect her son, or debate God, or even demonstrate her own faithfulness. She's just forgotten. And it's not the first time. Years ago, Abraham, out of concern for his own safety, passed Sarah off as his sister, allowing her to be taken into the harems of more powerful men. It's how Abraham got rich in the first place. He sold his wife.

And what does Sarah do in turn? She takes out all that rage on Hagar. You'd think a woman who has faced violence and the loss of children would be more sympathetic. Yet, Sarah inflicts the same sacrifice on Hagar.

Frankly, I wouldn't blame Hagar and Ishmael if they found vindication in the prospect of Abraham sacrificing Isaac. It may have felt like justice.

With so many scared, hurting people hurting others, it gets to where you wonder if anything can stop this carousel. That's probably what many of us feel as we watch the news. It's everywhere—a question hanging over prisons and morgues, over London and Aleppo, over Hebron and Jerusalem, over Khartoum and Ferguson, over Auburn, New York.

It's a question answered in our text: what man sacrifices, God saves. Every time Abraham raises a knife, God intervenes. God rescues Sarah. God rescues Hagar and Ishmael. God rescues Isaac.

You'll remember that none of these sacrifices—with the debatable exception of Isaac—is commanded by God. (Even God telling Abraham to listen to his wife isn't a command to send Hagar and Ishmael to their deaths; it's just good marriage counseling.)

In every instance, God is on the side of the sacrificed, the forgotten, the silenced, the vulnerable.

I picture Hagar lying on that hot sand, trembling, staring at her beautiful boy and begging God not to make her watch him die. I hear in her cry the words we long to hear from Abraham but never do. I hear the fierceness of a mother's love. I hear the scream of a woman who has struggled so much for the sake of her son. And then the most amazing thing happens: God hears too. God hears their cry and says, as God does to all prophets of outcasts, "Do not be afraid." God lifts water to their lips. God leads them out of the desert, gives them a future, and stays with the boy as he grows and learns to laugh again—the boy whom, years earlier, God had named Ishmael, meaning "God heard."

God had heard that the world worked a certain way—the powerful get rich and the weak get sacrificed. *God had heard* the gloat of death that violence can't be stopped. And God came close to despairing. But then *God heard* something else. *God heard* the defiant strength of a mother fighting for her son. *God heard* the plea for forgiveness from the cross. *God heard* a sound from God's own heart... a strange and dazzling music... somehow rising above the din of sacrifice. Love.

I wonder if Hagar, Ishmael, and Sarah heard it too. I wonder if Sarah, upon facing the prospect of losing her own son, finally saw herself in Hagar—two women, subject to violence and deserving of solidarity and compassion, not competition. I wonder if Hagar resisted the impulse to take pleasure in Sarah's pain and instead had pity for Isaac, a helpless boy like her own. I wonder if Ishmael, upon remembering the sound of Isaac's laughter, cried the shared tears of brothers sacrificed by their father.

We'll never know. We never hear from Sarah, Hagar, or Ishmael again. But we do know that Ishmael is remembered by Muslims as a prophet renown for his patience, goodness, and charity. So, maybe, they did hear.

But even if they didn't, God did. And God does still.

God heard it last week after that man drove his van through the crowd of Muslims in London. As men wrestled him to the ground, as the crowd hissed and justifiably demanded retribution, as arms flailed, a voice cried out: "No one touch him—no one! No one!" It was the voice of Mohammed Mahmoud, the mosque's imam. He and other Muslims pushed people away from the assailant and begged for calm and restraint, insisting that due process be done and that "all life is sacred."

God's heard it for the last four years as Muslims and Jews have gathered together to celebrate Ramadan in a Jewish synagogue in London. In 2013, the local Muslim community center was burned down in a terrifying act of arson. That's when Finchley Reformed Synagogue opened their doors to their Muslim neighbors. Now, they are friends, who eat, and play, and talk together about what unites, not divides, them.

That same voice of love was heard yesterday as a few of us gathered in Seneca Falls to hear the stories of transgender persons. It was heard in the voice of a mother whose transgender daughter just wants to be accepted. It was heard as transgender people shouted, "We exist!" and allies shouted "We see you!" It was heard as two women came up to us afterwards, telling us that they had cried when they saw us—me in my clerical collar, us with our signs about God's love. One of them has a son who's transgender; he was kicked out of the church, another son sacrificed. And then yesterday they cried because for the first time, in a very long time, they felt seen, they felt heard, by the church—by God.

Love, a word that invites the solidarity of the sacrificed. A persistent echo, inviting all the hurting people of the world to turn their hurt into kindness. A word that interrupts the monologue of violence and breeds community. A word—a God—capable of saving us all. **Amen.**