

MARCH 1, 2015: SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT
Genesis 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18 Romans 8:31b-34 Mark 9:2-10

If you're interested in life – especially life right here and now – you'll gain much from listening to today's three readings.

But that will only happen when we hear today's Genesis pericope against the background in which it was originally composed. If we don't, some of us might think Yahweh is history's most sadistic God.

This particular passage was written in the 8th century BCE by the Elohist author of Genesis, a writer who lived in the country of Israel: the Holy Land's northern kingdom. Governed by a succession of bad kings, many of Israel's residents frequently copied the religious practices of their pagan neighbors, especially child sacrifice. With no belief in an afterlife as we know it, it was commonly accepted that if you generously offered your first-born male child to the local fertility god, that god would generously see to it that you had many more (especially male) children. Having lots of children meant that when this life ended, you'd live on forever in the memory of those descendants. If you refused to offer that first-born male, you were playing Russian roulette with your family's future. Of course, faithful followers of Yahweh refused to kill their children, often enduring the criticism of their pagan neighbors that they weren't as dedicated to their God as non-Jews were to their gods.

Writing from a prophetic stance on this issue, the Elohist author creates a narrative in which Abraham, the ancestor of all Jews, is depicted as willing to sacrifice his first-born, Isaac, if that's what Yahweh demands.

The actual biblical narrative wreaks havoc with our emotions. Abraham not only has three days to think it over, but also engages in a heart wrenching conversation with Isaac as they're climbing up to the sacrificial site. Fortunately we all know the "happy" ending. The messenger/Yahweh intervenes just in time to stop the holocaust, substituting a ram for the boy. All's well that ends well.

But the sacred author's message is clear. As in all anti-fertility narratives, faithful Jews were expected to go against the God-controlling practices dominating the religious lives of their pagan neighbors. These misguided folk believed that if they said a certain prayer so many times, held their hands in a specific way, or performed actions which attracted the attention of the gods – for instance, boiling a baby goat to death in its mother's milk – the gods would be forced to grant whatever they prayed for.

True to their name, Israelites wrestled with their God, they didn't try to control him/her. They received life by preserving life, not by taking it. Their relationship with Yahweh and one another was unique among their contemporaries.

In a similar way, Jesus' earliest followers also stood out among their contemporaries on the issue of life. They didn't take life; they gave life. Though such constant self-giving would appear to diminish the quality of one's life, Paul assures the Christian community in Rome that their mentor, Jesus, actually experienced a completely new life when he gave his life for us.

No wonder when Mark includes a transfiguration story in his gospel. He's always interested in pointing out the uniqueness of Jesus and his followers. The historical Jesus' faith not only transfigured him in the sight of his followers, it also transfigured them.

It's significant that the evangelist depicts the transfigured Jesus standing between Moses and Elijah. Together the pair symbolizes the "law and the prophets:" one of the biblical names for the bible.

Mark is graphically displaying his conviction that, by imitating Jesus, we're doing what our sacred authors want their readers to do: to look at life from a completely unique perspective. If we're able to pull that off, then we'll actually transfigure life itself.

MARCH 8, 2015: THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT
Exodus 20:1-17 I Corinthians 1:22-25 John 2:13-25

Technically, we Gentile Christians aren't bound by Scripture's Ten Commandments. Only Jewish Christians – and Jews themselves - are responsible for carrying them out. But before we start to run amok and indulge in all sorts of immoral behavior, there are a few things we must understand.

These ten regulations comprise the central part of a covenant between Yahweh and the Israelites. A covenant is a contract, an agreement between at least two parties. Among other things, covenants impose specific responsibilities on each of the parties. "You can expect this and that from me; I can expect that and this from you." That's why those who originally entered into this particular agreement on Mt. Sinai didn't refer to these ten stipulations as "commandments." Instead, they regarded them as their Ten Responsibilities: ten actions Yahweh could legally expect them to carry out because of the contract they signed with him/her. All Jews are presumed to have obligated themselves to this covenant; a covenant which also included 603 other responsibilities: the Mosaic Law.

But what about non-Jews? Yahweh, for instance, didn't deliver my ancestors from slavery in Egypt in the 13th century BCE; they came from Europe to America in the 19th century CE because of economic pressures.

Paul was forced to deal with this question when he began to convert Gentiles to Christianity.

Jesus' original followers were all Jews, just as the historical Jesus was. So they logically presumed any non-Jew who wanted to become one of his disciples would first convert to Judaism and only then to Christianity.

Paul disagreed. As we know from Galatians 3, the Apostle was convinced that Christians imitated not the historical Jesus, but the risen Jesus, who is neither slave or free, male or female, Jew or Gentile. He/she is a "new creation." Paul believed that Gentile Christians were obligated to follow a covenant, but it was the one Yahweh made with Abraham hundreds of years before Moses' Sinai contract. In that Genesis 15:6 covenant, Abraham only had the responsibility to "put his faith in Yahweh;" no ten commandments, no 613 regulations.

Since Paul believed that the risen Jesus is actually Yahweh among us, then, as he reminds the Corinthians, Christ – Paul's title for the risen Jesus – "is the power of God and wisdom of God." By putting our faith in the Christ, and doing what he asks of us, we Gentile Christians are actually fulfilling the responsibilities of the original covenant Yahweh made with Yahweh's people back in Genesis 15.

Of course, the vast majority of 1st century Jews didn't agree with Paul's argument. (Neither did a lot of Jewish Christians.) That's why, by the end of that century, John the evangelist seems to have given up on converting Jews to Christianity. His gospel Jesus has morphed into a replacer instead of a reformer of Judaism.

In today's gospel pericope, for instance, the evangelist demonstrates how Jesus has replaced that revered Jewish institution, the temple. "Destroy this temple," Jesus proclaims, and in three days I will raise it up." Of course, as the evangelist reminds his readers, Jesus wasn't speaking about the ancient Jerusalem center of worship: "He was speaking about the temple of his body."

As Paul reminds the Corinthian community 11 chapters later in today's letter, we still have a covenant to follow: it's the one Jesus entered into with Yahweh; a covenant in which we totally give ourselves over to those around us and become one with them, a covenant we renew every time we take from the cup during the Eucharist.

Perhaps after trying to imitate Jesus, we Gentile Christians might think it easier just to keep the Ten Commandments. Is that why we have them, instead of Jesus' covenant, posted in so many of our churches?