

Judica, A ✕ D 2010
John 8:46-59

In the Name of the Father and of the ✕ Son and of the Holy Spirit.

1 Today begins Passiontide, the last two weeks of Lent. Passiontide is like Lent on steroids. Everything is more intense. The colors, after a brief break and a bit of rose, deepen and intensify from violet to scarlet. They mark the impending bloodshed. Our mouths and our bellies have been fasting throughout Lent, setting aside the most joyful expressions in the liturgy, and letting the rumblings of hunger persist throughout the day. Now our eyes begin to fast as well. Crosses and images are veiled. The Gloria Patri is removed from the service. As if that weren't enough, the Lenten fast intensifies. We eat even less, give up even more, devote more time to prayer and give more alms to the poor during these last two weeks of Lent.

2 And Passiontide is rife with irony, or, rather, Passiontide takes a magnifying glass to the irony already rife within Christianity and the Holy Scriptures. The Gospel reading concludes with Jesus hiding Himself. The Jews could not tolerate His preaching, so they accused Jesus of having a demon and being a Samaritan. They rightly understand that there can be no comfortable middle ground, an adept willingness to let the deeds and words of Jesus stand on their own that modern man refuses to have. Either Jesus is God or He is from the devil. "If anyone keeps my word, he will never see death," Jesus tells them. That's crazy talk, "Now we know you have a demon!" The words of Jesus are inflammatory. The cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. At least they understood His words. But they did not receive them by faith, and so they accused the Divine Word of God, the Second Person of the eternal, Holy Trinity, of having a demon and of blaspheming. So they picked up stones to kill Jesus, but He hid Himself and went out of the temple.

3 Jesus hid Himself in order that they might see Him as He is: God, the eternal Word, the incarnate Son of God, the great I AM who existed before Abraham. So we veil images so that we might not miss the point by seeing. The cross, the crucifix, the images of Jesus are not the things themselves. We don't deserve to look at the cross. We, like the Jews in the temple from whom Jesus departed, do not deserve to have Him abide in our presence. The next time we look on them, it will be on Easter, with new eyes. The crosses are not removed, just veiled, a reminder that until that Great Easter, the Day when Jesus returns to shatter the grave's power over us, as well, when He raises our dead and dying bodies, we cannot see clearly. The veiling of crosses and images and the departure of the Gloria Patri, the chanted Triune name of God, reminds us that Jesus has not departed from us. That's the irony of Passiontide. We do not see so that we might see more clearly. We do not sing so that we may sing more joyfully.

4 That irony, highlighted in Passiontide is the same as the irony in the account of Abraham in the reading from Genesis 22. Isaac was the child of the promise. His conception by 99-year-old Abraham and 89-year-old Sarah was miraculous. His birth was inexplicable to science, and, apart from the intervention of God, impossible. Ishmael will not suffice. The promised son will come according to God's work, not the scheming of Abraham and Sarah. Then God tested Abraham. He tested whether Abraham's faith, his trust, his looking for good in times of need,

was in the promised gift, Isaac, or I the Giver of the gift. Would Abraham's trust in God be great enough to sacrifice the son God had promised and delivered?

5 Abraham heard God's call and obeyed. Even when laughing Isaac asked his father, "The fire and wood are here, but where is the lamb for sacrifice?" Abraham obeyed. When it came time to build the altar and lay the wood upon it, Abraham obeyed. Even when he had to bind the only son from his wife Sarah and place him on top of the altar and wood, Abraham obeyed. And when it was time to take the knife and kill Isaac, Abraham obeyed. But the Lord intervened. "Do not lay a hand on the boy, for now I know you fear God." Instead of Isaac, Abraham would sacrifice the ram caught in the thicket. So he called the name of the mountain, "The Lord will provide."

6 What Jesus wanted for the scribes and Pharisees, what God wanted for Abraham, what He wants for you is repentance. Repentance is not a once-and-done deal. It's not even an item on your to-do list to get checked off periodically. It's a lifestyle. To live in repentance is to be a Christian, to embrace your Baptism. To live in repentance is to be of God. Jesus asked the scribes and Pharisees, "If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason you do not hear them is that you are not of God." The irony of the Law, of Jesus' preaching repentance, is that it's designed to prepare you for the Gospel.

7 You are not by nature of God. You do not naturally look at the cross of Jesus. The goal of Passiontide is the goal of the entire Church Year: putting your sinful flesh to death. Your ears don't naturally hear the Word of God. Your eyes don't naturally behold the things of God. Don't your ears naturally recoil when Jesus calls you to take up your cross daily and follow Him? Doesn't your brain instantly begin to conjure excuses when the Word of God calls you to care more about your neighbor's welfare than your own, to defend his reputation above your own, to hold in holy regard God's gift of marriage, to cherish and willingly receive His gift of children, to submit to and honor the authorities He has placed over you? Any thought that begins with "yes, but," is not of God; it's of the devil, the father of lies. Repent.

8 Because your nature is broken, because that which was created by God is no longer naturally of God, the Creator took human flesh. When Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent, he entered once for all into the holy place, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of His own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. Because of Jesus' death and resurrection, because by His own blood He has entered the eternal holy of holies and created a passage for all sinners likewise to enter into the presence of God, His blood purifies your conscience.

9 Set free from death and sin, the Christian is free to make a sacrifice. Because you could never earn God's forgiveness and mercy, He has given it to you freely through the water of Holy Baptism, through the proclamation of His word, through Holy Absolution, and through the Lord's Supper. These set you free. Because you could never offer a sacrifice big enough or pure enough to merit forgiveness, God sets you free, counting the sacrifice of the life of Jesus to your credit. That sets you free to live the Christian life, which is a life of sacrifice. Your sacrifice is the opposite of Abraham's offering his son. Abraham was saved from sacrificing because of the sacrifice of the ram. You are freed by the sacrifice of the Lamb of God to offer yourself as a living sacrifice. You are set free from having to fulfill the Law in order that you might fulfill the

law of love toward your neighbor. You don't need to offer any sacrifice to God. So you are free to sacrifice yourself, to live the Christian life, in service and love for those around you. That's the irony of Passionide, the irony of the Christian life; you are set free by Christ's sacrifice to be a sacrifice for others.

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