

St James United Church



Message for June 28, 2026 Memorial Sunday (Fifth Sunday after Pentecost)

“Peace Not Sacrifice” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Genesis 22:1-14; Matthew 10:40-42; and “Think of Others” by Mahmoud Darwish (trans. Mohammed Shaheen)

Each year July 1 hits hard, made harder this year by it being a hundred and ten years since the tragedy that was Beaumont-Hamel. As we too painfully know, on that day seven hundred out of a regiment of only eight hundred were killed, missing or wounded. With such a loss, the dreams not only of individual soldiers and their families but of the whole Dominion of Newfoundland died on that day.

And as we contemplate this tragedy in worship this morning, the sadness is compounded further as the lectionary includes the reading from the Book of Genesis when Abraham is told by God to kill his son. What a hard story to listen to, even though, thankfully, Abraham’s hand was stayed before he could execute God’s “command.” It is all too reminiscent of our own tragedy, because if not for the angel’s intervention, not only Abraham’s dreams for Isaac and his descendants, but God’s promise to bless all the families of the world through them, would have died that day.

Thankfully, many Bible scholars believe that the stories of Abraham and Sarah, along with Isaac, Ishmael, Hagar, Jacob, and the rest, aren’t historical but composite stories that pull together legends and folk tales describing multiple people, even whole tribes, entire regions. They are primarily an origin story for the people of Israel, but they also offer wisdom as we all navigate our lives. They offer us stories of faith and compassion, sometimes trickery, and in today’s story, cruelty. God even seems implicated, asking Abraham to sacrifice his son, even though they intended to save Isaac at the last minute. Because they are folklore, we need to be ready to ask what teaching the story offers. In this instance you get it when you recall that this story is part of a larger narrative where before God told Abraham to kill Isaac, Sarah had done the same when she insisted that Hagar and Ishmael be sent into the wilderness. She didn’t act alone though. Abraham went along with it. Why? To ensure that only one son would receive God’s blessing despite God promising that Abraham’s descendants would be a blessing for all the families of the earth. Abraham and Sarah sought to hoard those blessings and advance their legacy by excluding others. In this wider context, who is cruel and who shows compassion? Hint: God rescues both sons from death.

We often frame the story not as folklore but as biography. Yet without a teaching, God is just cruel. So, to make that palatable we turn Abraham into a hero, reframe the story as a test of his obedience to God rather than an ironic tale that exposes his cruelty to Hagar and Ishmael. The result is that we project Sarah and Abraham’s cruelty, effectively our own, onto God. We then misplace the focus of the story, ignore the compassion and care that God shows in rescuing both boys, and highlight the importance of committing to a “higher cause” even if it means the sacrifice of life.

There is a spiritual consequence as we deify the value of obedience, not questioning authority, of having blind faith. We see this in the church, although thankfully that is less the case, especially in the United Church, as we encourage each other to think for ourselves. But deifying obedience, elevating authority, having blind faith has a cultural consequence too, those same values needed to make war possible, be it in 1916 or 2026. Sacrifice is valued in this framework but not usually demanded of the children of those who declare war, but of their “subjects.” That we know is the story of Newfoundland and Labrador, as our children answered the call to serve the nation, serve the king, and by extension serve God. And the sacrifice is always wider than them, especially in modern war as increasingly the lives of civilians are considered just collateral damage, part of the price that must be paid to accrue power and prosperity and prestige, modern day blessings. The patriotism that is rallied to bring these about has echoes of Sarah and Abraham casting out Hagar and Ishmael, an “us not them” dynamic with tragic results.

And yet is this the blessing of the world’s families that God promised to bring through the descendants of Abraham? No. God has a more inclusive dream. We hear it as Jesus instructs his disciples to go into villages and towns in his name, captured in one simple line: “whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple will not lose their reward.” The phrase “little ones” refers to Jesus’ disciples, but the phrase carries a sense of children, later in the gospel Jesus being more explicit, saying we must be like children if we want to inherit God’s kingdom. He is instructing his disciples to go into the world with vulnerability not bravado, an openness to being dependent on others, as if they’re children. The way of Jesus isn’t about accruing power and prosperity but extending compassion and caring, the blessing of God experienced in humility and hospitality. They’re to bear his name in a spirit of love, open to others, accepting welcome as well as extending it. Note too the lack of hierarchy, no deified rulers or betters, the one welcomed as a prophet not receiving less or more than the one welcomed as a righteous person, and both to be little ones accepting water.

Instead of that dream, it feels like we’re living a nightmare as Christianity (and with it Judaism and Islam) is presented in some quarters with echoes of the past, drawing on the misfocused version of the Genesis story as some preachers and pundits seek a tough God who demands sacrifice, who eschews compassion, who hoards blessing to only a few rather than extending it to more and more people. That brand of faith only leads to more Beaumont-Hamels and makes pointless the sacrifice that 701 men made on July 1, a hundred and ten years ago. In contrast, the Jesus I meet in the gospel, who I meet in prayer calls for connection, for caring, for a peace grounded in welcome. His way is echoed in Mahmoud Darwish’s poem and his call to always think of others. Mahmoud’s dream, Jesus’ dream, ultimately God’s dream, is for all of us to recognize that our prosperity is tied to others, that true power is shared not hoarded. This dream is shaped not by God needing obedience but their rescuing Ishmael and Isaac. This dream is expressed in Jesus affirming the simple gift of a cup of cold water. This dream is what brings blessing to all the families of the world and not just a few. This dream doesn’t die on the battlefield. This dream remains alive as long as we hold it in our hearts. Thanks be to God. Amen.