



Jephthah’s Daughter: An Invitation to Non-lectionary Preaching

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I. PRELIMINARY REFLECTIONS

Lectionaries are not carved in stone by the hand of god. They are hammered out by the mundane work of ecclesiastical committees. Over the centuries, lectionaries have been constantly revised and frequently criticized. Parish pastors should not feel guilty if they read the Bible independently of liturgical demands, looking for fresh passages on which to preach. Turning away from the lectionary, at least on occasion, may revive pastors intellectually and spiritually.¹ Alternative preaching texts may be old familiar stories that otherwise never get read on Sunday morning. They may be austere texts that test the mind and the imagination by confronting believers with the majesty of God and the harshness of the human predicament.

An example of the latter is the story of Jephthah’s daughter (Judg 11:30-40). Jephthah the Gileadite vows that if the Lord will give him victory over the Ammonites, he will present as a burnt offering “whoever comes forth from the doors of my house to meet me.” Ironically, it is his only child—a daughter whose name we do not know—who rushes out to greet her father upon his return. Jephthah is heart-broken as he tells her what he has done. His daughter stoically accepts her fate, admonishing her father that he must keep his oath. After two months of mourning, during which she “bewails her virginity,” Jephthah’s daughter is ready to go to her death. The story ends by informing the reader that the daughters of

¹See Walter Sundberg, “Limitations of the Lectionary,” *Word & World* 10/1 (1990) 14-20.

Israel adopted the custom of mourning the daughter of Jephthah “for four days every year.”

When I first ran across the story of Jephthah’s daughter many years ago, I recoiled in Marcionite horror at the thought that such a barbaric account had found its way into Holy Scripture. But it is such a compelling tale—one of the few examples of sheer tragedy that the Bible records—that I could not get it out of my mind. I am not alone in being attracted to the story. Artists have been drawn to it for centuries. For example, George Frideric Handel made it the subject of his farewell oratorio completed in the year 1753. *Jephtah* contains some of Handel’s most exquisite and moving music, even though the librettist, the Reverend Thomas Morell, violates the text by having God relieve Jephthah of his savage promise in the third act. Despite the moralism of the eighteenth-century libretto, Handel provides the listener with sublime music that shows profound identification with the plight of both Jephthah and his only child. The appreciation of this masterpiece is enhanced by the knowledge that the composer wrote it between terrible fits of blindness that plagued his final years.

Resolving to preach, I turned to the commentaries for help. Unfortunately, I found little in the way of useful guidance. Some scholars speculate that perhaps it is not really Yahweh to whom Jephthah makes his oath, but a primitive, heathen god.² Others make much of the possibility that Jephthah might have expected an animal to greet him when he returned home rather than a human being.³ I find no justification in the text for the former theory; the latter, I consider simply bizarre.

In *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), Phyllis Tribble commends the story as an example of the abuse and rejection of women in the Bible. She mourns Jephthah's daughter as the women of ancient Israel did long ago. The method of her mourning, however, is somewhat problematical. Tribble's argument is an example of feminist attack on the "patriarchy" of Scripture. Its ultimate effect is to denigrate the authority of Scripture—hardly a fitting subject for the Christian preacher. Besides, if there is any book in the Bible that does not deserve the charge of patriarchalism, it is the book of Judges. It is in Judges that we find the towering figure of Deborah, the strongest woman leader in all of the Bible. But even if we attend exclusively to the story of Jephthah's daughter, there is a strength and dignity that emanates from her character that makes the label "victim" an inadequate description.

Of much more help was an unpublished lecture of my colleague in Old Testament, Diane Jacobson, entitled, "Women in the Book of Judges: A Reflection of Israel." Israel in the chaotic period of the Judges, says Jacobson, was "betwixt and between" as it attempted to live by the unfettered spirit of charismatic authority. "Rule by the spirit does not allow for human evil, the constancy of sin, and the all-pervasiveness of apostasy." The absence of fixed rules and order brought with

²Lillian R. Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989) 96.

³This argument is made in the footnotes of *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy (New York: Oxford, 1991) 318.

it a level of suffering and upheaval that wreaked havoc in the lives of those who were most vulnerable. In the book of Judges, asserts Jacobson, Israel looked unflinchingly at the dark side of human ambition and power. Judges exemplifies one of the chief wonders of the Old Testament: namely, its ability to tell the story of Israel critically and candidly. This remarkable people of the ancient past knew how to face up to the sinful consequences of self-absorption.

Here, I thought, is a theme for preaching. Do not we live in a time of chaos without fixed rules and order? Have we not embraced a Dionysian excess in which self-exaltation has become a dominant criterion for living? Has not the family suffered because mothers and fathers give themselves over to careers and passions? Jephthah's public victory cost him tragic defeat in his private life. Do we not, in our day, repeat both his triumph and anguish?

There is more. The story of Jephthah's daughter is a tragedy that finds parallels not only in the present but also in the stories that the human race has told itself from ancient times. A glance at my dog-eared copy of Edith Hamilton's *Mythology* (New York: Little, Brown, 1941), a trusted companion since my days in high school, reminded me of another sacrificed child: Iphigenia, daughter of Agamemnon. She also is a victim of battle: indeed, that archetype of all human struggles, the Trojan War. Lest one think that it is daughters alone who go to their death, there is the story of Idomeneus, King of Crete, who, during the same war, offered his son to the gods.

There was one final piece to my reflections. A time-honored hermeneutical practice of the church has always been to look for types and analogies in the Scriptures. The Bible, asserts the church, is not like any other book. It holds within it a mysterious pattern that bears the imprint of the divine. It is fitting to seek connections, however vague or half-formed, between any passage of the Bible and our Lord and Savior. We should read the Bible, says Luther, so that it “urges Christ.”

In skeletal form, *the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter is the story of a father who gives up his only child for the sake of the people Israel*. Does not her story call us to Christ? Does not sacrifice of this daughter remind us of the sacrifice of God’s Son?

The sermon that follows was built on these reflections and preached at the Chapel of the Cross at Luther Northwestern Seminary during the Lenten season of 1992. Adding immeasurably to the occasion, the seminary choir, under the direction of Paul Westermeyer, sang the great chorus, “O God Behold our Sore Distress,” from the first act of Handel’s *Jephtha*.

II. THE SERMON: IN MEMORY OF JEPHTHAH’S DAUGHTER

So there arose an Israelite custom that for four days every year the daughters of Israel would go out to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite. (Judges 11:40)

The custom is long dead. You will look in vain for her on the liturgical calendar. We do not remember Jephthah’s daughter.

This should not surprise us. We have become a cautious community of faith that selects carefully, gingerly, what it reads to itself on the Sabbath. In our

lectionary, the “letter” of Scripture is, I think, too often covered by a “spirit” that is regimented, doctrinal, bland. At Sunday service, the walls of Jericho never fall (Josh 6:20); the temple of Dagon never comes crashing down (Judg 16:30); David never cries “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom!” (2 Sam 19:4); Isaiah does not go forth to stop the ears of the people and shut their eyes so that they may not be healed (Isa 6:10). We are in the business of bolstering the saints and comforting them. This is a good thing. But the way we do this week in, week out, often becomes little more than an exercise in gentility. We rush headlong to the gospel; God’s grace simply *is*.

“Even if this is true,” you may say, “what could possibly be of value in the story of Jephthah’s daughter?”

I poked around in the commentaries. The scholars cringe. They speculate that perhaps some Canaanite distortion had wormed its way into Israel’s faith, making the people, in the wild and woolly period of the Judges, succumb to the evil of human sacrifice.

The poor soul writing the footnotes to *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*—trying to make the best of what he thinks is a horrible tale—floats an especially panicky defense. “Jephthah,” he writes, “promises a sacrifice in exchange for victory. The Hebrew text does not assume that the intended victim would be a human being. Given the arrangements of homes with courtyards that housed domesticated animals, it is likely that Jephthah assumed that one of these animals would

be encountered first upon his return home.”

Now, dear Christian friends, I ask you: If, when Jephthah came swaggering over the hill, followed by his lusty troops, he first met Boots the Cat, falling upon its back and, in the way of cats, wanting its belly rubbed, do you really think this story would have made it into the Good Book?

What is the fear about reading the story? Do we need to be reminded, especially in this sacred season of Lent, that when the subject is sacrifice, the Christian reader is called to perk up the ear and pay attention? What do we have here? A father sacrifices his only child for the sake of the people and for the sake of a promise. The child obeys willingly, but laments the duty. Now, just who does this remind you of? Are we so tied to literal exposition of the Scriptures that we cannot see the type, the correspondence? Are not Jephthah and his daughter closer to Jesus than Abraham and Isaac who had, after all, a ram conveniently caught in the thicket (Gen 22:13)? In the Christ, this sacrifice of daughter by father is taken up, assumed by the flesh, recapitulated, communicated to divinity.

And *what* is taken up? In itself, the story of Jephthah’s daughter is the agony of the ages: the chaos of war, ambition, desperation, oath-taking, unforeseen consequences, calamity in the family. This is the story of the race. It is repeated again and again. Aeschylus tells us that the fleet was ready to sail; the city of Troy its destination. A soothsayer tells Agamemnon that he must sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia to insure a safe voyage. Agamemnon is beside himself. “The joy of my house, my daughter,” he cries. But he “dares the deed,/slaying his child to help a war.”

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And all her prayers—cries of Father, Father,
Her maiden life,
These they held as nothing,
The savage warriors, battle mad.

And lest you think it is only daughters on the chopping block, there is the fable of Idomeneus, King of Crete, commander of eighty ships at the battle of Troy. Endangered by a storm at sea, he promises to sacrifice to the gods the first one he sees. Whom does he see? It is his son.

Sure, these stories are about ancient battles long ago. But we tell them to ourselves, we pass them on, we set them to music, because they are about us. Are we not “battle mad” in our public life? Who pays if not the family, our children, for our ambition? We may not take the field against the Ammonites, we may not sail for Troy, but we fight to the death for the almighty buck, for our careers and identity, for our drink and drugs, for passions that destroy the marriage bond. It is not enough for us to say, when asked what we do, that we are parents—not only in blood, but as a society—parents, custodians of the next generation. This is not enough for us; we must have more. Why?

The family across the street just broke up, parents going their separate ways. My daughter Anna, eight years old said, “Oh no, it’s *here* in the neighborhood.” Our children are frightened of us that we will leave them insecure. They talk about us in school. They worry that they cannot depend on us.

What is taken up? This is the burden that Jesus takes up and carries to the cross: *all the*

things that we do to each other.

I poked around in the commentaries. Some see Jephthah's daughter as another sad chapter in the battle of the sexes. In this interpretation, Jephthah's daughter as *Woman* becomes a symbol of the oppressed. She satisfies the insatiable desire of contemporary culture to find victims and use them to denigrate the social order.

Uncovering victims: this is a vital concern; I do not deny it. It is a project in which we need to be engaged. But it is not Jephthah's daughter. She is not beaten down, hapless. The situation is a terror. She is noble. She is righteous. An oath has been given to God and she will do her duty: "My father, if you have opened your mouth to the Lord, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, now that the Lord has given you vengeance against your enemies, the Ammonites." She goes into the mountains for a time, her garden of Gethsemane, and bewails the bitter cup of her virginity. She wants to live, to experience life. But she bends her will. Her bent will is made of more iron than our free will.

What an age it must have been: ancient men and women who lived before we got used to making the distinction between matter and spirit. In everything they did, they stood before eternity. They were not beset by subjectivity. They did not exaggerate the value of their finiteness, thus curving in upon themselves. They did not wait for Godot. They followed God. Life was morally charged, extraordinarily significant.

The daughter of Jephthah obeyed the will of the Lord Almighty, the one who

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kills and makes alive, the one who wounds and heals (Deut 32:39). What a people it was who worshiped God in that time! In their primitive way, they witnessed unrelentingly to the rectitude of the universe. What a custom it must have been to remember Jephthah's daughter! "The ancients are better than us," said Socrates, "for they were closer to the gods." It is an old classical cliché, but it is true.

The daughters of Israel held all these things in their hearts and made lament for the daughter of Jephthah. This had a deep purpose. It was an anticipation of another act of mourning. The Lord would later say to the prophet Zechariah:

I will pour out a spirit of compassion and supplication on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that, when they look on the one whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn. (Zech 12:10)

On the eve of the Passion, I remind you that this is our task.

I said at the beginning that the custom was long dead. I misspoke. In the wondrous way of God's plan, we are at one with those daughters of Israel so long ago.