**SERMON NOTES** — March 16, 2025

> The LORD said to Abraham, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." Abraham brought God all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two.

Ritual blood sacrifice! Three times the Book of Genesis gives an account of God making a covenant with Abraham and Sarah to begin the history of salvation. This is the one that seals it with ritual blood sacrifice. What's that all about? Anthropologists tell us that it was actually a specific kind of ritual sacrifice used to seal covenants in ancient cultures. In this kind of covenant, the parties involved would walk between the sacrificed animals, symbolically declaring, "May this happen to me if I break this covenant." In the typical structure of such agreements, the weaker party (such as a vassal king) would be expected to pass between the pieces, committing themselves to obedience under penalty of death. However, in this story, only God (represented by the fire and smoke) passes between the pieces. Abraham is not required to walk the path of blood (because he is asleep!), meaning that God takes full responsibility for the covenant. This twist on ritual blood sacrifice is radical: instead of demanding fidelity from Abraham under threat, God unilaterally binds God's self to the promise, essentially declaring that God would rather suffer and die than break God's word.

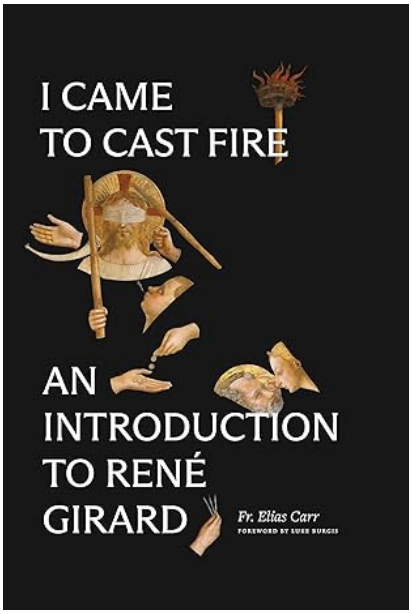
Here's the bold claim for today: learning to understand the role of ritual blood sacrifice in the Bible is *the key* to understanding the entire biblical journey. God, beginning with the covenant to Abraham and Sarah, makes a commitment to journey with humankind until we understand that the false gods of sacrifice are gods of our own making. Covenant is also a way to understand the scope of our evolution as a species. It took tens of thousands of years for us to wander down the wrong path of sacrificial violence. For the true God to help us learn that God is truly a God of love is taking a long time, too. God makes a covenant with Abraham and Sarah to journey with us over the long haul — well over three thousand years so far and still counting.

In two weeks, we read Jesus's Parable of the Prodigal Son. It's a parable of God watching sons go down paths that split them apart, because neither one truly knows the heart of their father as unconditional love. It's like the parable of our human evolution. We've wandered down paths that lead us to think of gods in terms of sacrificial violence instead of love. Jesus is the son who can lead us onto the right path of knowing God as love. The key to revealing who God truly is, in other words, is to have revealed to us who we truly are, as children who have wandered onto the wrong path. We are a species on an ultimately dead-end evolutionary path because we have come to believe in gods who command us to use violence as a solution to violence. But the true God has never abandoned us. We have always been welcome to choose the path back home to the God of love. To the God whom Jesus shows us, in other words, by taking on our sacrificial violence and then by being raised up in three days in order to forgive us. In order to begin leading us down a new evolutionary path that leads to abundant life.

Two thousand years after Jesus, choosing the right path is as crucial as ever. We Christians have wandered off the path again. When we allied ourselves with the nationalism of the Roman Empire 16 centuries ago, we began to mix in the gods of sacrificial violence with the God of Love. I'm afraid those who consider themselves Christian Nationalists have fully relapsed into the gods of violence. As we read the Gospel story this morning, we are once again confronted with the choice. In the face of Herod's threats, Jesus chose to do brave, humane work to liberate the enslaved and to heal the sick. To be *with* others in covenantal love instead of withdrawing in fear. He insisted that God's commonwealth wouldn't arrive by surrendering to empire, to nationalism, but would come with the wing of a sacred embrace. God was *not* Pilate, Herod, or Caesar. But God, the true God of Israel, is willing to suffer with and for us — the Mother Hen who refused to fear the fox. Who refused to run away. That's the Lenten story today — another temptation, another choice to choose the right path. Herod or hen? Unholy arms or sheltering wing? Jesus willingly surrendered to vulnerability. Will we? We are here in covenantal love this morning, under the shadow of sacrificial violence, to encourage one another to choose the path of self-giving love.

Excerpt from Fr. Elias Carr's *I Came to Cast Fire: An Introduction to René Girard* (Word on Fire, 2024).

*A one-paragraph summary of the three main ideas to Girard's anthropology (pages 1-2)*:




In broad brush strokes, Girard formulated his theory in three stages: mimesis, scapegoating, Christ. *First*, through his reading of novels, he discerned that human desires are mimetic or imitative of another's desire, and that these mimetic desires give rise to rivalries. *Second*, these accumulating rivalries threaten to destroy the community unless a scapegoat presents itself. When it does, the community blames the scapegoat for its crisis. Girard describes this sequence of events as the "scapegoat mechanism," by which the community is reborn through the expulsion of the victim. Ritual sacrifice, myth, and prohibitions sustain the new culture, which restrains mimetic rivalry. Girard speaks of persons or institutions that restrain violence, such as government, as the *katéchon* (the term is from St. Paul's Second Letter to the Thessalonians). *Third*, Girard argues that the violent origins of culture remained hidden until the Paschal Mystery (the cross and resurrection) revealed the scapegoat mechanism. Thereafter, the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, operates in history, proclaiming the innocence of the scapegoat, which gradually undermines the *katéchon*. Today, the modern concern for the victim has become the one universal ethic that has created the first planetary culture. Yet we are in a perilous situation because mimetic rivalries are multiplying and intensifying rapidly. Without resorting to the scapegoat mechanism, humanity faces a decision: self-destruction or conversion.

*Father Carr explains how at the heart of human evolution — the thing that enables our species to survive — are cultures founded in religions of "sacred violence," with gods who command us to sacrifice others in order to keep law and order (pages 16-17)*:

Girard argues that religion explains human origins. He proposes scenarios by which protohumans might have become human — that is, a culture-making animal. This transition from protohuman to human takes place through a coevolutionary process of biology and culture. . . . Considering the evidence, Girard concludes that humanity is a child of religion, which emerges from the scapegoat mechanism. Put simply for the moment, the scapegoat mechanism provided a solution to the problem of unbounded violence that arose from humanity's mimetic (imitative) desire. This was not something devised by human ingenuity or reason; rather, the first human beings stumbled into it. Since ethologists have found evidence of such behavior in primates, perhaps it has prehuman antecedents. Whatever the case, the scapegoat mechanism and its consequences, ritual and religion, protected the young species from unlimited violence, the unintended byproduct of mimesis (imitation).

*So the bottom line is that human beings, for many millennia of evolution, have a deep, vested interest in believing in gods who command violence. For humanity to come to believe otherwise — namely, in the God of Jesus who is completely nonviolent — will take at least several millennia. It means nothing less than a re-evolution of sorts . . . becoming human based on the power of love rather than the powers of force.*