

Rams and resurrections: God's response to violence

by [Lyn G. Brakeman](#) in the [April 12, 2000](#) issue

Last Palm Sunday my friend Ann went to church and found herself in the middle of a mob scene. As it turned out, the congregation was taking part in a dramatic reading of the Passion narrative. The assembled worshipers were cast as members of a violent, bloodthirsty crowd that was excited at the prospect of a crucifixion and caught up in emotional hysteria.

At a horrifying moment in the drama, the actor playing Pilate asked, "What should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" The crowd-congregation began to shout, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Ann was caught up in the emotion of the moment, but not in the crowd's emotion. Instead, she found herself outraged by the chant. Her impulse was not to follow the scripted "Crucify him!" but to scream instead, "No! Don't crucify him! No!"

On Maundy Thursday, I was still thinking about Ann's experience. What was Jesus's reaction when the crowd condemned him to death? Did he react as Ann did? I wondered what it would be like to hear Jesus scream. What could possibly justify such cruel violence against an innocent man?

I tried to direct my mind to thoughts of the resurrection. Everything would be all right soon, I told myself. After all, it was almost Easter. But it wasn't all right. If this event was real to people, as real as it was to Ann during the Palm Sunday reading, how could we all return to jump for joy on Sunday, only two days away? I couldn't do it. The thought of the resurrection felt repugnant to me. I began to feel outrage at the idea of the resurrection, outrage that surprised me. It all seemed too little, too late. I felt no joy at such an outcome. At that moment, I felt that we were abusing the resurrection by leaping over the horrible pain in order to prove God's triumph over death.

But it came only *after death*. That just wasn't enough. I wanted more from God. Where was God? And God's anger at this atrocity? I needed God's wrath somewhere

in the scene. I needed God to be with me as I raged for justice. I knew that God's presence could be felt in the love of the faithful women who did not abandon Jesus but stayed at the foot of the cross. But that wasn't enough either.

Why hadn't God provided a ram and saved Jesus as God had done to save Isaac? Abraham, in obedience to God's instructions, set out to sacrifice his beloved son but was stopped at the very last minute by a heavenly voice telling him to unbind Isaac and sacrifice a ram conveniently waiting nearby in a thicket. Where was Jesus's ram?

I knew Jesus wasn't a child as Isaac was. I knew Jesus made adult choices. But his choice to give his life to the cause, however noble and loving, had never seemed to me to be a real choice. It was more like an agonizing trap that forced Jesus to choose between his life and his integrity. He sacrificed his life to be true to his soul and his gospel, yes. But he was innocent and set up by the evils of a complex system of powers that demanded the blood of a scapegoat to solve the unrest of the roiling rabble and to restore the status quo.

According to author Gil Bailie, cultures have always sought out violence as a solution for social unrest. When a bloodthirsty crowd is fed the flesh and blood of an innocent scapegoat, the crowd's violent tendencies are allayed. Consider the shrewd analysis of chief priest Caiaphas when he observed that Jesus was stirring up the people with his seditious teachings and threatening the Judean establishment: "You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." Better indeed.

Ann's cry of "No!" continued to haunt me. Could God's come-lately act of raising Jesus from the dead resonate compassionately with Ann's passion? With mine? Had Ann's scream on that Palm Sunday in church actually been a cry for resurrection? And what if the resurrection of Jesus was like the ram caught in the thicket, a divinely instituted act of salvation? What if the resurrection could be understood, not so much as the miraculous triumph of divine power or even as the restoration of hope and joy to a despairing world but as God responding to our violence by illuminating everything in a moment of truth? What if the resurrection was God's way of exposing, in radical and brilliant light, the sin of the world?

I began to see that God didn't will the killing or the sacrifice of either Isaac or Jesus. God's choice is to enlighten and to love, not to punish. Both ram and resurrection thunder divine outrage—outrage like Ann's at that Palm Sunday service, outrage

that can rise only out of compassion. God is shouting No to our violent and cruel solutions to the problem of sin and reconciliation.

God shows us that we must practice resurrection by daring to suffer with victims of violence, by demonstrating compassion in our personal actions and by challenging public policies.

Resurrection theology brings joy to me, not because it signals a spectacular display of supernatural almightiness, but because it shows me God's way: Bring life, not death. Ann's instinctive judgment that the cross shouldn't happen was correct: Don't crucify him! The resurrection is divine affirmation of that judgment. It is a sign of what should happen, a startling corrective.