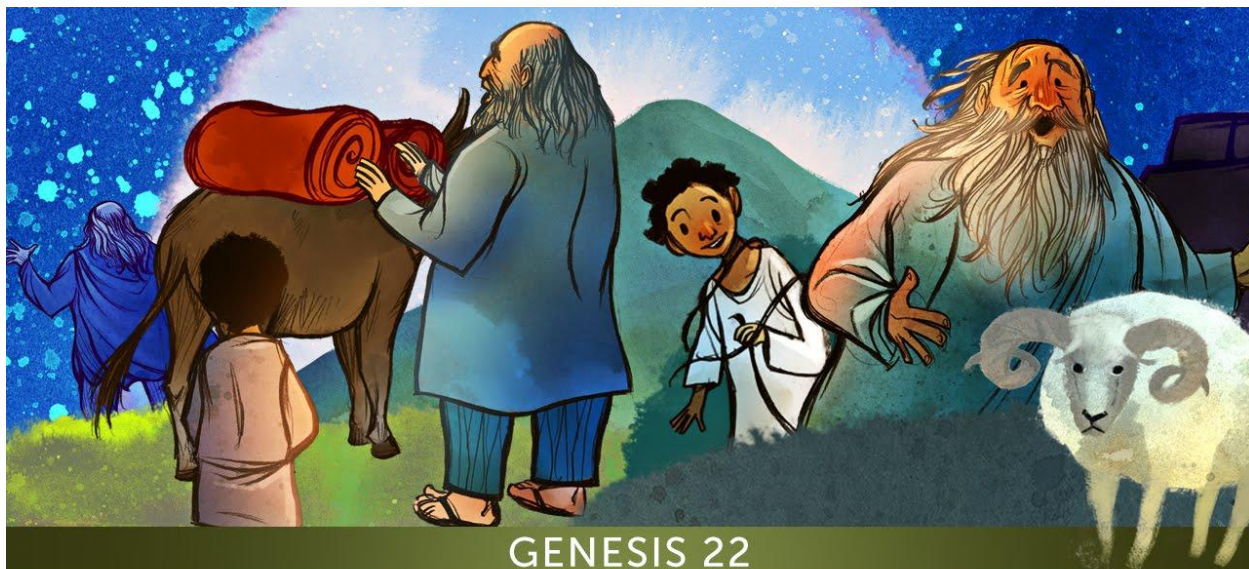




GENESIS 22

ABRAHAM & ISAAC



THE WAGES OF SIN

ROMANS 6:23 SCRIPTURE MEMORY SONG



Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 8)

Romans 6:12-23

June 28, 2026

Our Scripture lesson from Romans includes some of Paul's most definitive statements about sin and our enslavement to it. The language of enslavement is startling to modern ears, but in Paul's view, creatures are always subject to some lordship — if not Christ's lordship, then other unworthy lordships. Thus, Bob Dylan seems to channel Paul when he contends in a classic song: "You're gonna have to serve somebody. Well, it may be the devil, or it may be the Lord, but you're gonna have to serve somebody."

Related reading: ["Bob Dylan: A reluctant voice of a generation"](#) by Luke Esteban

Some might question both Paul and Dylan on this point, since modern people are heirs to a quintessential American belief that we are fundamentally free and that sin is no more than a temporary setback — certainly not enslavement. Yet in Paul's view, life is shaped by two encumbrances: one leading to death and the other to life.

In Romans 6:18, Paul argues that the Romans are “freed,” but that this freedom is not unencumbered. As Pauline scholar Beverly Gaventa puts it in her New Testament Library commentary on Romans, “the human is always enslaved and at the same time always free: the question is not whether one is free or enslaved, but to whom or what one is enslaved and from whom or what one is freed.”

To get at this question, it is important to attend closely to the verses that immediately precede the lectionary text in Romans 6:1-11, where Paul speaks of baptism in cruciform terms as immersion into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This cruciform pattern of dying and rising in union with Christ exposes and resists death-tending realities that enslave us while empowering new life.

Gaventa contends that Paul draws a stark contrast in these verses between two dominions — one occupied and enslaved by the toxic realities of sin and death, the other empowered for life by Christ's lordship. Paul, as she notes, is emphatic on this point: “Those who have been

baptized into Christ ... do not live in territory controlled by Sin.” Far more than individual transgressions are in view, for sin is “a suprahuman power that has enslaved humankind.”

Indeed, Gaventa describes the powers of sin and death as “cosmic bullies.” It is altogether evident, I think, that these “cosmic bullies” have been wreaking havoc on God’s good creation throughout history, both past and present. In our own day, we can see their power at work, for example, in the polarized and violent “othering” of those different from us, in the systemic devaluing and marginalization of women, minoritized people and God’s good creation.

Baptism into the life and death of Jesus Christ frees us from enslavement to all such hierarchical, bullying realities. Indeed, in his most celebrated baptismal affirmation in Galatians 3:28, Paul bears witness to God’s reversal of the Roman empire’s hierarchical “othering,” declaring that for the baptized, “There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

In other words, racial, economic and gender “othering” and devaluing are washed away and declared anathema for those who are immersed in the baptismal waters of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This new baptismal reality exposes and disrupts death-tending patterns of hierarchical “othering,” as God’s resurrecting power forms

us for a new life together that is deeply relational, egalitarian and richly diverse.

Few contemporary issues speak more directly to Paul's understanding of sin and participation in God's new creation in Christ than the question of what it means to be male in America today. At present, our culture is saturated with distorted ideals of masculinity that normalize the bullying power of othering.

As an example, a network of online spaces now referred to as the "manosphere," with alarming appeal for young men, is promoting misogyny and aggressive definitions of manhood, and providing forums for grievance and scapegoating. Moreover, Christian nationalists and right-wing pundits are valorizing the hierarchical and bullying power of White men. Yet if I understand Paul correctly, being formed in Christ is being freed for an alternative reality that exposes and disrupts such idolatrous, hierarchical and abusive notions, thereby empowering new life that is deeply relational, egalitarian, and diverse.

To be in Christ is to be fully human and to live with others rather than over or against them.

Questions for reflection on Romans 6:12-23

- 1.
2. What do you think of Bob Dylan's lyric: "You're gonna have to serve somebody. Well, it may be the devil, or it may be the Lord, but you're gonna have to serve somebody." How might this song speak to the reality of sin in our lives and culture?
3. What do you think about the notion of sin and death as a "cosmic bully"? Where do you discern this reality



in our present world and in your personal experience?

4. What do you think of Paul's notion of freedom as living into the new creation in Christ, as one who is fully human and in relation with others, not over and against them?