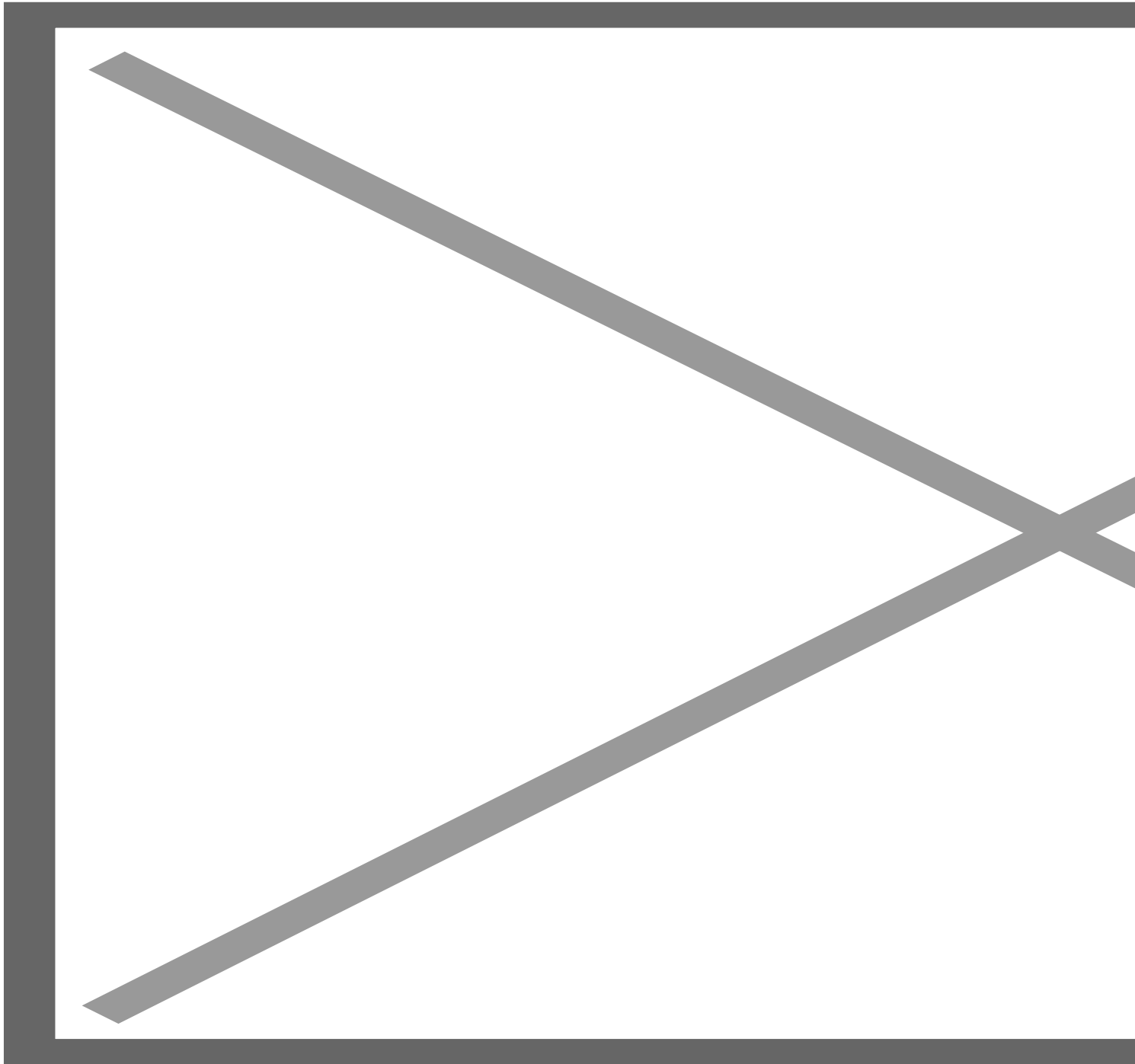


Arbitrary president, trustworthy God

Our leaders have made it impossible to trust them. God is different.

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Century illustration (Source images: Getty)

If there is one thing that characterizes our current moment for me, it is precarity. The sense that everything is up for grabs is advanced by the arbitrary, capricious nature of our current leadership. President Trump recently argued that he is not bound by the frameworks of international law, but is instead only restrained by “his mind.” As we watch our military attack Iran and ICE terrorize our own communities, it’s hard to argue that the world order that Americans once trusted is holding.

But a quick look through scripture shows that following the sacred story of God’s involvement in our world is not without a fear that God could be arbitrary. There is perhaps no better moment of this whiplash than when God commands Abraham to sacrifice his only son Isaac, the very basis of God’s promise to make Abraham’s descendents into a nation that will bless the world, only to pull back at the last moment and offer up a ram as an appropriate sacrificial substitute. The passage is full of dread and has proposed a problem for generations of readers who grapple with what it might reveal about the nature of God. Why would God put Abraham through something that just amounts to a test of loyalty?

My favorite interpretation of this event comes from Marilynne Robinson’s *Reading Genesis*. Robinson reminds us that child sacrifice was a common expectation of Near Eastern deity worship. In this context, God is not asking anything out of the ordinary. But by offering a substitute, God says that God is not like these other deities. She even gets into the psychology of the text in ways that I appreciate: “Now Abraham knows that the most passionate worshippers of Moloch or Anat are not more devout than he. The most excruciating sacrifice they made was no greater than the one he would have made if God Himself had not forbidden it.”

At the heart of the Biblical story is an invitation to trust that we might not have the whole story and that God is working behind the scenes in sacred history to make all things new. That’s the central argument of Job. At the end of the book, after all the travails that Job has undergone, God upbraids him for daring to question the being that brought all of creation into being. This is also the invitation that God makes in the story of Jesus and his crucifixion—God knows what God is doing, even if it looks to our eyes like all is lost.

For the most part, this invitation holds. We can trust God, knowing that the creator of the universe is love incarnate. Whatever appears to be arbitrary or capricious is the result of our limited perspective. Even if we have doubts, faith is at its core about trust. We have to trust that God is in control, even when it does not seem to be the case. The trauma of Abraham’s family weaves its way through the generations and has real effects, but it’s hard to argue that his family hasn’t proved to be a blessing for all the nations, just as God said that it would.

The problem with our current moment is that it is hard to trust that our present leadership is guided by a moral framework or longsightedness.

Scripture has plenty to say about capricious and arbitrary leadership. The historical books of Kings and Chronicles are full of examples of leaders drunk on their own power, who violate sacred rules and harm their people in the process. Saul attempts to hang on to power by killing his appointed successor David, but David shows him mercy in the Cave at En Gedi by not assassinating him when he had the chance. The passage underscores David’s restraint in contrast to Saul’s bloodthirstiness with an exchange between the two:

“See, my father, see the corner of your cloak in my hand, for by the fact that I cut off the corner of your cloak and did not kill you, you may know for certain that there is no wrong or treason in my hands. I have not sinned against you, though you are hunting me to take my life” (1 Samuel 24:11).

Even King David was not immune from the allures of power. In perhaps his greatest moral failing, David assassinates Uriah, a valued military leader, in order to marry his wife, Bathsheba. When this happens, God

enforces dire consequences, sometimes personally, and at other times, for the entire nation.

Perhaps the greatest fault of capricious leaders is that they do not listen to wise counsel. Scripture shows us how leaders surround themselves with people who refuse to tell them bad news. Note how Ahab ignores the warnings of the prophet Micaiah when they contradict his strategy:

Then Micaiah said, ‘I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, like sheep that have no shepherd; and the LORD said, “These have no master; let each one go home in peace.”’ The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, ‘Did I not tell you that he would not prophesy anything favorable about me, but only disaster?’...The king of Israel then ordered, ‘Take Micaiah, and return him to Amon the governor of the city and to Joash the king's son, and say, “Thus says the king: Put this fellow in prison, and feed him on reduced rations of bread and water until I come in peace.”’ Micaiah said, ‘If you return in peace, the LORD has not spoken by me.’ And he said, ‘Hear, you peoples, all of you!’ (1 Kings 22:17–18, 26–28).

God also behaves in an underhanded way in this story by falsely telling the court prophets that the war will turn out well for Ahab. Regardless, the force of the narrative is clear: Ahab does not want to listen to Micaiah because he will give him bad news. I can’t help but draw a direct parallel between such an exchange and the increasingly militarily aggressive foreign policy of the United States.

Taken together, a biblical theology of leadership begins to emerge. Godly leadership looks like listening to wise counsel, no matter what it has to say. Godly leaders are characterized by mercy and forbearance. When these leaders emerge in the biblical narrative, they bring about prosperity and morality. Where the other sort of leadership is practiced, there is only destruction.

It is unfair to expect perfection from our leaders. But when our leaders govern from avarice, militarization, and dehumanization, they make it impossible to trust that they are operating in our best interests. In the absence of the sort of godly correction that happens in scripture, which I would not hold out hope for, the only path forward is accountability. Recent polling shows that 29 percent of Americans are in favor of abolishing ICE. That seems like a cogent first step for an organization that has operated with impunity and killed activists like Renee Good and Alex Pretti and immigrants like Silvero Villegas Gonzalez. Jeremiah’s lament seems most important here: “they have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace” (Jeremiah 6:14). We must instead treat our wound strenuously by holding our leaders to account, a task that seems hopelessly imperilled as the Supreme Court seems intent on shielding them from any legal repercussions. That’s precisely the sort of action that might help us regain trust, a sense that the will of the executive is not arbitrary and unaccountable, but is instead wielded on behalf of the people and ultimately accountable to them.

Despite the sense of precarity brought on by capricious leadership, we are not without hope. In scripture, we find that redemption is possible, and even the worst situations are not outside of God’s ability to call life into dead places. Even here, even now. 2 Chronicles 7:14 articulates just what that path might look like: “if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.”

Perhaps that is precisely what we must do: pray, not with naïveté, but with resolve. The biblical invitation to trust God is never an invitation to trust unjust rulers. Scripture distinguishes sharply between the steadfast love of God and the fragile egos of kings. We pray not as an escape from politics but as a sign that we trust God is still working, even if we cannot see it. And that prayer is not just with our hearts, but with our feet as we stand against dehumanization wherever we find it. If healing is to come to our land, it will not arrive through the will of any one leader, but through a people who refuse despair, who tell the truth about wounds, and who insist—faithfully, stubbornly—that power must be accountable.