

**St. Martin-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church**

Keller, Texas

Sermon for June 28, 2020 ~ Proper 8A

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“After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, ‘Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ He said, ‘Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you’” (Gn 22:1-2).

So begins one of the most frightening, shocking, dangerous, powerful, controversial, and yet central stories of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Every child’s nightmare. Every parent’s worst fear. Most definitely *not* a bedtime story to read to your kids, even if it does come from the Bible.

It’s true that the story does come out all right in the end, when the same God who commands the sacrifice of Isaac at the last possible moment provides a ram as a substitute. But any caring, thinking person cannot help but ask “does the end justify the means?” What kind of God would command the murder of a child in order to test our faith and prove our love for God? What sort of person would even consider, let alone obey, such a command? And what kind of religion would hold up such a person as a model for faith?

And yet this is precisely what both Judaism and Christianity do. From Genesis in the Old Testament to Paul in the New, and in Islam also for that matter, Abraham is held up as the model for faith. In Christian scripture and tradition Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac is even seen as a precursor of God’s sacrifice of Jesus. And Abraham’s willingness to put God first above all else is seen as the essence of faithful discipleship. As Jesus himself put it in Matthew’s gospel, “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Mt 10:37-39).

**The story of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac is among the best known in the Bible. It is also one of the most theologically demanding. What then are we to make of this strange shocking tale?**

Some have suggested that what it is really about is the end of child sacrifice, which unfortunately was an all-too real and frequent practice in the world in which Abraham lived. The thinking went something like this: When these gifts are burnt upon the altar, their essence arises to the gods above as a sacrifice and gift pleasing to them, proving our devotion and earning their continued good will. In the story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac, God puts a stop to the practice of child sacrifice, providing a ram as a substitute instead.

While there may well be a grain of truth in this interpretation, this is clearly not the understanding or interpretation of the story we find in other parts of the Bible or in Jewish and Christian tradition.

Here’s the usual explanation: The story proves at last Abraham’s ultimate and total trust in and dependence upon God. From this point of view the story is not really about Isaac or child sacrifice, but about Abraham and his faith or lack of faith in God’s promises. So far Abraham’s record has been a mixed bag. Yes, he had the faith to leave family, home, and the past behind, in order to set out toward

the as yet unknown future of God's land of promise, believing that somehow, despite Sarah's barrenness, God would provide a way for them to have children as numerous as the stars. But when faced with danger in a foreign land, Abraham asked Sarah to pretend to be his sister so that he would not be killed when the king desired Sarah for his harem, putting in serious jeopardy the possibility of a child of promise being born to Abraham and Sarah to say the least! And later still, when in their old age Sarah and Abraham began to lose hope in the possibility of ever having children of their own, the still barren Sarah gave Abraham her Egyptian maid Hagar to bear a surrogate child on her behalf. And then, to make matters worse, years later after Isaac the child of promise was finally born of Sarah, Abraham at first was reluctant to obey God's command to cast out Hagar's child Ishmael in order make way for Isaac, God's chosen one.

Now, for the ultimate test. Hagar and Ishmael are gone. Abraham and Sarah are far advanced in years. Isaac is their only and most loved child. Does Abraham have enough faith in God to give up Isaac, trusting his future to God alone, even when he cannot see the way ahead? God needs to know the answer to this question if Abraham and his descendants are to become the bearers of God's promises and hopes for the world. The answer is yes. Abraham passes the test. And God provides a way for the promises to be fulfilled. Through the mercy of God's loving providence, a ram is provided and Isaac is saved. And Abraham becomes the model of a faith that trusts utterly and completely in the promises of God.

**Theologian Walter Brueggemann, in his commentary on Genesis, best clarifies and builds upon this understanding.**

He pointedly observes that in our modern sophistication we find the idea that God *tests* us "primitive," and the idea that God *provides* for us questionable, preferring to believe that "God helps those who help themselves" and therefore putting our ultimate trust in our own plans, schemes, and efforts, as Abraham and Sarah were themselves tempted to do.

Brueggemann writes, "The testing times for Israel and for all of us who are heirs of Abraham, are those times when it is seductively attractive to find an easier, less demanding alternative to God. The testings which come in history (and which are from God) drive us to find out whether we mean what we say about our faith being grounded solely in the gospel... Most complacent religion will want a God who provides, not a God who tests. Some in bitterness will want a God who tests but refuse the generous providing. Some in cynical modernity will regard both affirmations as silly, presuming we must answer to none and rely upon none, for we are both free and competent. But father Abraham confessed himself not free of the testing and not competent for his own provision" (W. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, p. 190-193).

Here, in a nutshell, is the best the tradition and we have been able to make of this powerful, shocking, unnerving, but illuminating story. God tests and God provides, and we ignore these two twin realities at our peril. Crucifixion and resurrection cannot be separated from one another. It *is* only through losing our lives that we find them. It *is* only when we love God above all else that all other loves can fall into place. It *is* only through crucifixion that we and our world can be resurrected to new life. This "mystery of testing and providing" is at the heart of both the prophetic faith of the Hebrew Scriptures and the gospel of Jesus Christ. For "Resurrection concerns the keeping of a promise when there is no ground for it. Faith is nothing other than trust in the power of the resurrection against every deathly

circumstance. Abraham knows beyond understanding that God will find a way to bring life even in this scenario of death. That is the faith of Abraham” (Brueggemann, p. 193). And it is the faith of Jesus and all who would follow him.

**There are for me, and I suspect for you, a few nagging questions which still persist.**

For while it may well be true that faith can come into existence only when we finally put our ultimate trust solely and completely in God, we cannot help but ask, but what kind of God would put us in the position of making such a choice as this in order to prove our devotion in the first place? And is this the kind of God in whom we should or would want to put our trust?

And what about all that set the stage for this final test? God’s choice of Isaac over Ishmael, and later Jacob over Esau, and later still Joseph over his older brothers, demonstrates how God’s “providential election and care” often surprises us by choosing those we least suspect, breaking all our usual human expectations about who should lead and who should inherit, choosing and using those gifted by the Spirit rather than merely on the basis of position or social convention. And, in our story, as a sort of “consolation prize,” God promises to make a great nation out of the descendants of Ishmael as well as those of Isaac. But the descendants of Isaac are to be the children of God and the inheritors of God’s promises in a way that the children of Ishmael are not. No wonder centuries later the Islamic Arab descendants of Ishmael would tell the story from a different perspective, pointing out that Ishmael was the first-born and most loved son of Abraham, and that while God also blessed Isaac, it is the children of Ishmael who are the true inheritors of God’s promises through whom the world will be blessed.

What sense, then, are we to make of these sacred texts and stories in this pluralistic world in which you and I live, a world where “all the nations” are de facto becoming one nation and one world, drawn together by a common viral enemy? Is it that God “plays favorites?” Or is it *our* choices, *our* playing favorites, that God must redeem and use for the good of the whole human family in spite of *our* messing it up by our forced choices as to who are or are not God’s “favorites?”

Is it Isaac whom we should sacrifice? Or is it our own certainties, our own arrogance, our own ideas about God and what it is God wants from us, our own hard-headed and hard-hearted reluctance to open ourselves up to the new thing God is continually doing in our midst? Could it be that instead of “sacrificing Isaac” or “sacrificing Ishmael what we need to do is to sacrifice our mistaken belief that we must offer up either the Isaacs or Ishmaels of this world as a burnt offering in order to prove our own devotion to God? Could it be that what we need to sacrifice is our need to choose between Isaac and Ishmael as the “child of promise,” and instead affirm that all the children of God are children of promise, and that the world will be blessed not just through one or the other, but when all are joined as brothers and sisters in the one family of God? That might be a vision for which a person would be willing to “sacrifice everything else.” That might even be the vision toward which an ever-moving God is calling us to move and grow as well.

Could it be that in our time the Abraham story itself forces us to ask and wrestle with precisely these kinds of hard but vital questions? The Bible, after all, is the record of our long, perilous, ongoing human journey toward faith, meaning, purpose, love, hope. As such it records our failures as well as our successes in our never-ending journey toward God.