

Sermon preached at St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, CT

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Oh Abraham. You are our spiritual ancestor, the father of many nations. Abraham is righteous and faithful; Scripture tells us, "Abram believed the Lord, and the Lord credited it to him as righteousness."¹ This week, however, we hear a story that quite frankly make me question Abraham's righteousness and maybe even God's goodness, if just a little. In today's reading, God tells Abraham to sacrifice his dearly beloved, yearned-for son Isaac. What kind of God promises offspring and then participates in their near destruction? And how can Abraham be righteous if he is willing to sacrifice his own son for any reason? And why oh why does God demand that Abraham kill his own son as a sacrifice to God? It seems to go against the arc of Scripture, of God creating, building relationship, and redeeming us. It hurts.

The thing about the Book of Genesis is that its truth does not come from its literal or historical veracity. Most of us already believe this, when we stop to think about it. Most of us see the creation story in the first chapter of Genesis in mythic terms. The seven days of creation have plenty to tell us about God and our relationship with God without worrying about the scientific historicity of its description of how the world was made. And what about the second creation story, the one with Adam and Eve, the one where God the gardener molds mud into a human form and breathes into it? That tells me so much about God, about God's love and care, about how we are formed of everyday things, of dust and dirt and atoms, and also are imbued with the very breath of God. Truth upon truth, regardless of science.

Many biblical scholars see the entire book of Genesis as a pre-history of Israel, as a cobbling together of legends and stories, a looking backwards into the deep, deep past to understand the present. And the present I speak of isn't just *now*. It's the present of the biblical writers and editors who finally wrote down the oral history of Israel, the songs

¹ Genesis 15:6 NRSV

and dreams and stories. That work happened centuries after the stories in the book of Genesis, stories of the first humans, and Noah, and Abraham and Sarah. To read these stories as a person of faith is to read them with an eye to what God might be telling us about God and about God's relationship with the chosen people. This orientation invites me to look through the details of a story toward a wider understanding of who God is and who God calls us to be.

This week's installation of the saga is painful. God tells Abraham, "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." And Abraham obeys. Abraham and his men and his son journey for three days to Mount Moriah, the appointed place of sacrifice, and then Abraham and Isaac climb alone. Abraham builds the altar, lights the fire, binds his son, and only at the very last moment does God intervene.

God seems mean and capricious, and Abraham lacks a backbone. There are plenty of people who dismiss stories like this, stories that show God in a less-than-loving light. They talk about the Old Testament God as opposed to the New Testament God, but as Christians we worship the *One* God, who became incarnate in Jesus, a Jewish man who loved and obeyed that Old Testament God. We cannot dismiss the stories that displease us. On the contrary, what's usually needed is a slow, thorough read, with attention to detail and language while at the same time paying attention to what this particular moment means in the saga of how Israel became Israel.

The first three words of the passage matter very much. *God tested Abraham*. From the beginning of this story, the reader knows that God never intended Isaac's death. *God tested Abraham*. Why is God testing Abraham? Well, God does not, *cannot*, know that Abraham will be obedient. As a medieval rabbi put it, "God can only know things that can be known."² Our free will, the very thing that makes us a little bit like God, also puts us at odds with God again and again. God knows us, God calls us, but God just can't be sure that Abraham will live into the covenant. Genesis is full of people in relationship with God who fail to obey, and Abraham is no exception. Abraham followed

² quoted in Davis, Ellen "Take Your Son: The Binding of Isaac"

God's call to leave his homeland, and Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness; and also, Abraham has made some strange choices, choices that sometimes show a preference for self over others. Not once but twice does he tell his wife to pretend to be his sister because a king thinks Sarah is desirable and Abraham fears for his life. God has promised Abraham land, and offspring, and blessing: Will Abraham uphold his part of the covenant, to love and worship God?

God's relief is obvious at the end of the passage, when it is clear that Abraham would give up even his son. God stops Abraham and says, "for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." The angel of the Lord goes on to say, "Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you." We don't hear any of Abraham's emotions in this passage, but God is jubilant. Abraham has passed the test, Abraham has put love of God above all else, even his son. Because Abraham was willing to sacrifice everything, God will bless him.

The very beginning and the very end of the binding of Isaac frame and make meaning for what happens in the story. It's not about God's cruelty or Abraham's cowardice, it's not even about Isaac's trauma; it's a story about the trust and obedience demanded of us as covenant holders with God. It's about how an old man became the ancestor of many nations, about what is required of those of us who say we want to be in relationship with God. Abraham's faith is reckoned to him as righteousness, and that righteousness is made manifest by his action. Perhaps righteousness at work is our covenant response to God, and this story is an extreme example of what that looks like.

God demands the unthinkable, and Abraham, the righteous, the obedient, the late-in-life father, trusts God. To love and fear God is to trust God, even when it doesn't make sense. I wonder if part of what this story told the Hebrew people about themselves is that obeying God can feel like certain death, but that's not where the story ends. As a Christian this resonates with me: The worst part is never the last part. It resonates with the Exodus, with all of those newly freed slaves rushing toward the Red Sea with the might of Egypt behind them, only to have God part the waters. Or later, when the

Hebrew people are hungry and thirsty in the desert, and ask Moses, “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?”³ It resonates with the Babylonian Exile, the destruction of the temple, the end of the might of Israel. Perhaps, perversely, this story is supposed to give us hope. Perhaps it’s supposed to tell us that some of the things God calls us to do are impossibly hard, and so upsetting to all we’ve ever known or imagined, and in that despairing place, in that uncomfortable and dangerous spot, God is right there ready to do something new.

In *Just Mercy*, Bryan Stevenson talks about Vaclav Havel and his notion that the only thing people need is hope. People struggling for independence may want money and recognition and such, but to quote Stevenson, “these were things they wanted; the only thing they needed was hope. Not that pie in the sky stuff, not a preference for optimism over pessimism, but rather ‘an orientation of the spirit’... That kind of hope makes one strong.”⁴

Havel is speaking to the context of people’s struggles for independence, but the idea resonates. Hope as an orientation of the spirit. It creates a willingness to position yourself in a hopeless place and be a witness, to believe in a better future despite all evidence to the contrary. Hope sees a way through when caught between an army and an ocean. Hope sustains a people in exile, sustains the oppressed, the wrongfully convicted. Hope brought those women to foot of the cross when the man they adored and followed had no chance of survival; that same hope that brought them to his tomb three days later.

Abraham believed God, and so even when called on to do the unthinkable, perhaps Abraham had this kind of hope, this orientation of the spirit that made him strong. That sort of hope proceeds from God. Hope is what we need now, and not the effervescent Pollyanna *it’s all going to be okay* kind either. We need an orientation of the spirit that emboldens us to stay in the hopeless places and witness to what we see and then do the work of making it better. Amen.

³ Exodus 14:11 NRSV

⁴ *Just Mercy*