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Texts: Genesis 21:1-3, 22:1-14, John 1L29

The Binding of Isaac

We blithely say those words each Sunday after the scripture readings, “Thanks be to God” but, truthfully, there are some readings for which I am not thankful. There are some passages that I wish had gotten edited out of Holy Writ. But the narrative lectionary which we are following this fall, which takes us on a sweep through the Old Testament, hitting some of its highlights, served it up, so here it is, God’s Word for us, the story we Christians have traditionally called “The Sacrifice of Isaac.” In Jewish circles, it’s known, more accurately as “The Binding of Isaac,” for, thankfully, Isaac is not in the end killed by his father, only bound and laid on the altar.

It’s a terrible story, a complex story, one that a single sermon cannot do justice. It has been troubling throughout its history of Jewish and Christian interpretation and one I have wrestled with mightily. I was nervous last week to paint amateurish pictures on giant blank canvases before a watching congregation for twenty minutes; but preaching this text is much more daunting. What can this Word from God possibly mean?

The story of the binding of Isaac raises so many questions. The most obvious is what kind of father is Father Abraham? What kind of father could ever countenance killing his own child for any reason? And what kind of God would ever ask it, even if this God did not plan on letting it happen? The subject of child sacrifice is unavoidable in this text. There is one vein of interpretation that says the story is a polemic against child sacrifice. Apparently, the practice did happen in the Ancient Near East. It apparently happened in Israel, else there wouldn’t be laws against it later in the Old Testament.ⁱ After all, you don’t forbid something that no one is doing. According to this vein of interpretation, the story of the binding of Isaac is etiological, i.e. it explains why animal sacrifice is substituted for human sacrifice. At the climax of the story, Abraham is prevented from slaying Isaac on the altar and a ram is offered up instead. Indeed, the location of the altar we are told was on Mount Moriah. That’s the location cited later in the Bible as the place where Solomon built the temple.ⁱⁱ The temple, of course, was the locus of the Jewish sacrificial system, where bulls and lambs and birds were killed by the priests for all sorts of reasons from thanksgiving to cleansing from sin. So, some interpreters say that the story explains the shift from human sacrifice to animal sacrifice.

But another vein of interpretation of our text argues that if the story were truly about a prohibition of human sacrifice, the sacrifice of his son would have been Abraham’s idea and not God’s. So, the very logic of the story runs counter to a lesson about God not wanting human sacrifice.

It’s such a bare bones story that there are questions which arise because we are given so few details, like what was going on in Abraham’s emotions—was he afraid? horrified? resigned? heart-broken? We are not told. And how about Isaac? What was he thinking and feeling? We

get an inkling that he sensed something was amiss when he and his father were three days into the journey.

“Father,” he said.

“Here I am, my son.”

“The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?”

We wonder if Isaac willingly laid down on the altar, or resisted being bound? How did this experience affect the father-son relationship afterwards? And, what about Sarah, Isaac’s mother? She is nowhere to be seen in the narrative. Did she object or go along with Abraham’s plan? Did she get to say goodbye? Was she even told? ⁱⁱⁱ There are many unanswered questions.

Perhaps what is most disturbing about this story, though, is the whole idea of God testing Abraham. Our first impulse may be to think God is playing games with Abraham, but that’s *if* we think God already knows what the outcome of the test will be. According to the text, God does not know how Abraham will respond. The God of Genesis is not the omniscient deity that Greek philosophy reasoned. The God of Genesis truly does not know what will happen. That’s evident from the Flood story. If only God had known how wicked people would become, God would never have made them in the first place. God regrets creating humans so wipes out all but Noah and his family.

In God’s current plan, God has chosen Abraham to be the means of blessing for humanity. God has promised that Abraham and his wife Sarah will have many descendants through whom all the families of the earth will be blessed. Therefore, God wants to find out if indeed Abraham is willing to trust God in this venture. So, this test is to find out whether Abraham will obey God when asked to do this horrible, illogical thing. It is not to teach Abraham anything. If anything, it is God who learns something. When Abraham passes the test, God says, “Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” God is reassured. Is God really so vulnerable?

While the story raises many questions, what *is* clear in the story are two things. First is Abraham’s faith. It echoes the faith he displayed when God first called him to pick up stakes from his homeland and strike out to points unknown. “Get thee going,” the King James Version translates God’s command to Abraham back in chapter 12 verse one, and again here in chapter 22 verse 2, the only two times this verb form is used in the entire book of Genesis. “Get thee going ... to a place that I will show you,” God says in both stories. Without hesitation, both times, Abraham gets going. Granted, between these two summons, there have been some bumps along the way, as Abraham and Sarah waited through years of barrenness for a child to be born, the child Isaac who will be the beginning of the multitude of nations which God promised. But despite the stumbles, Abraham and God’s covenant relationship remains strong.^{iv}

In fact, so intimate was their relationship that Abraham had no trouble arguing with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah.^v So, Abraham’s faith is not always just blind submission. But it certainly shows no wavering here in the tale of the binding of Isaac. Abraham wastes no time and gets going early in the morning. He is willing to follow God’s command. Just as Abraham has given up his past, when he and Sarah departed Haran so many years ago, leaving behind family and home and land, he is now willing to give up his future, represented by this long-desired child of promise. Abraham trusts God. But he does hope against hope that, despite

God's command, he will not have to go through with the terrible deed.^{vi} To his servants, he says that "we" (meaning himself and Isaac) will return after worshiping. And to Isaac, he says that God himself will provide the lamb for the offering. Even as Abraham raises the knife, when it seems that Isaac is to be the lamb that God has given him, Abraham trusts that somehow, some way God will see him through the horror and still keep His word. Abraham's faith is exemplary. The writer of Hebrews cites Abraham as a model of discipleship:

By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom he had been told, 'It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you.' He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.^{vii}

So, this story clearly illustrates Abraham's faith.

Secondly, it also clearly illustrates God's provision. When the angel halted Abraham from plunging the knife into his son, Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught in a thicket. It was just as he had hoped, as he had told Isaac, 'God himself will provide the offering.' The narrator tells us that Abraham named the place *Jehova Jireh*. That translates as, *God will provide*, and to be sure we get the point, the narrator adds, "As it is said to this day, On the mountain of the Lord it shall be provided." In other words, God is trustworthy. God can be relied on. God's promises are good.

We bank on God's provision when we pray in the Lord's Prayer: "Give us this day our daily bread." Give us what we need. Do not leave us high and dry, but see to our welfare and sustenance.

Later in the Lord's Prayer we also pray, "Lead us not into temptation." A better translation of the Greek is actually "Do not put us to the test." In the Bible, God occasionally does test people, like God tested Abraham. I don't think God does this a lot and certainly does not author calamity to see how we will respond. But it's true that our faith does get tested. When we are tempted to shade the truth, to fudge on our taxes, to have an affair—that is, to put our pride, our security, our selfish desires, all things near and dear to us, ahead of God and God's commands, will we rely on God to give us the strength to resist? When we prefer not to turn the other cheek nor to love our neighbors, much less our enemies--that is, not to let go of our cherished prejudices, will we trust God to provide us the mercy to do so? When life deals us a hard hand to play, stripping us of what we love most, will we despair or depend on God to see us through? Paul, writing to the Christians in Corinth penned these words of encouragement:

No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.^{viii}

In other words, God will put a ram in your thicket. If you don't remember anything else I say, remember that God will put a ram in your thicket.

So, while this story raises some thorny questions, it does pretty clearly point to Abraham's faith and God's provision. However, I cannot end without mentioning one more thing. That's the fact that the earliest Christians have seen in the story of the binding of Isaac resonances with the story of Jesus: a beloved son, an only son, who carries the wood upon which

he is slated to die, a lamb which is sacrificed, three days journey, and a kind of resurrection. The big difference, of course, is that Jesus unlike Isaac is killed. In the gospel story he is the obedient one, the lamb of God, which makes all the more poignant the provision of God. God is willing to sacrifice God's own self in Jesus Christ, that we might know the extent of God's love and faithfulness.

Friends, you are children of Abraham. Remember what we have sung today, "Great is God's faithfulness. All we have needed God's hand has provided." So, have faith. And trust that God will provide.

ⁱ Lev. 18:21, 20:2-5; 2 Kings 3:27; Jer. 7:31, 32:35; Ezek. 20:31

ⁱⁱ 2 Chronicles 3:1

ⁱⁱⁱ In the chapter following we are told that Sarah died. In the history of interpretation, the rabbis connected the dots and said she died of a broken heart when Abraham returned home and told her what happened.

^{iv} See Gen. 15:6, 17:1-26

^v Gen. 18:16-33

^{vi} I am reminded of Frederick Buechner's statements, "Christianity is mainly wishful thinking." [*Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, (Harper & Row: New York, 1973), p. 96] and "I think of faith as a kind of whistling in the dark because, in much the same way, it helps to give us courage and to hold the shadows at bay. To whistle in the dark isn't to pretend that the dark doesn't sometimes scare the living daylights out of us. Instead, I think it's to demonstrate, if only to ourselves, that not even the dark can quite overcome our trust in the ultimate triumph of the Living Light." [*Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter's Dictionary*, (Harper One: New York, 1988), p. xi].

^{vii} Heb. 11:17-19

^{viii} 1 Cor. 10:13