

**Genesis 22:1-14** “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him.”

**Romans 6:12-23** “Present your members to God as instruments of righteousness”

**Matthew 10:40-42** “Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.””

## Trying to Get Our Attention

**O God of love, grant us the wisdom, the strength and the courage to seek always and everywhere after truth, come when it may, and cost what it will.**

Our Gospel passage from Matthew this morning is about welcome – about radical hospitality. Jesus’ message in Matthew is that impressive religious experiences like exorcisms and miracles are inadequate. “What counts is the cup of cold water given to a thirsty person...” – especially a thirsty person who has no privilege or power to demand it.<sup>1</sup> Jesus is sending folks out to spread the news of God’s love, assuring them that when people welcome them, they are welcoming Jesus, and that means that they are welcoming the Holy One. I would love to preach a sermon about welcome this morning.

But the lesson from Genesis about Abraham’s binding of Isaac is such a troubling story to me that I feel compelled to address it when it appears in the lectionary. I can think of little else than the theological purpose that pairs this story with the story of Jesus’ death on the cross, and I don’t like the pairing one bit. I’ve heard too many people use stories like the binding of Isaac and the crucifixion of Jesus as a measure – a kind of theological yardstick to size up and encourage blind obedience. I haven’t heard nearly enough criticism in religious settings about the kind of father who would be willing to kill his own son; or the kind of god that would devise such a horrendous test of faith. I wonder why anyone would want to worship such a god.

Maybe you know the theological glorification of the notion that God sacrificed God’s own son on the cross as a means to salvation developed in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century in the time of the Emperor Constantine who had ordered the execution of his own son.<sup>2</sup> Certainly that is not a coincidence. While this binding of Isaac story (The Akedah) gets upheld as a story about the rejection of child-sacrifice in ancient Hebrew practice, and the while Akedah gets upheld as a lesson about the challenges of devotion to God, there *are* traditions of critique within Judaism. The Zohar, for example, stresses the danger of obedience that overcame Abraham’s sense of compassion.<sup>3</sup>

There is a rabbinic tradition that Abraham’s wife Sarah collapsed in shock and died when she learned that her husband had taken their son to the binding in response to a divine instruction. In the Biblical record, Abraham and Isaac never spoke to one another again – indeed Isaac never saw his father again until he arrived to bury Abraham. In other words, this is not a story where everyone lives happily ever after, just because Abraham demonstrated some kind of obedience, or just because a messenger from God intervened. And reading this story again reminds me that I often find myself travelling on the path between a god I cannot worship and the temptation to believe that God does not exist. I know that this is a familiar path for some of you, too.

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<sup>1</sup>Allen & Williamson, *Preaching the Gospels without Blaming the Jews* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup>James Carroll, *Constantine’s Sword: The Church and the Jews* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001)

<sup>3</sup>W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981), p. 150.

One of my friends from seminary<sup>4</sup> framed a new understanding of the story of the binding of Isaac for me. She insisted that this is a story about “Father” Abraham’s understanding of God and of how he understood God’s word or God’s will in his life. And if we understand the story this way, it might shed some light on how we understand God’s word or God’s will in our own lives. The fancy church word we use to describe what we’re doing when we’re trying to figure out what God is saying to us or what God hopes for from us is “discernment.” What my friend rightly insisted, is that discernment is now and always has been navigated through the fog of social location – that is, gender, race, class, ethnicity, religion, age, sexual orientation, ability, and personal experience.

So what do we know about Abraham’s personal experience and social location from the biblical narrative? Well, when he first heard God tell him to pack up and go off to the promised-land, Abraham’s response was to get up and go. Although there was some risk, Abraham did not abandon all – he took relatives and his wife, servants, and his possessions with him. He did not interpret God’s direction as unbelievable or impossible. But later, when God told him that Sarah, well advanced in years, would bear a son, Abraham challenged God.

When God told Abraham that a city would be destroyed because of the inhospitality of the inhabitants, Abraham bargained with God, convincing God not to destroy the city if there were 50 righteous men, and then not to destroy the city if there were 40 righteous men, and so on until God agreed that if Abraham could find ten righteous men in the whole city, God would not destroy it. There’s significant precedence for Abraham to express disbelief and even argue with what he hears God tell him. So why wouldn’t Abraham argue with God when he heard God ask him to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac? (In the Hebrew narrative, Abraham hears God asking very politely – it’s not an order. God says please here, although word that is not translated.) So why wouldn’t Abraham politely decline? Perhaps it is because in Abraham’s cultural context, women and children and slaves were the property of ruling men. As property, they were to be used as needed. Earlier in Genesis, Abraham was ready to sacrifice his wife Sarah to ensure his own safety not once, but twice. First when traveling to Egypt to escape a famine, Abraham feared that the Pharaoh would kill him so that Pharaoh could have his wife, so he told the Pharaoh that Sarah was his sister and sent Sarah to be part of Pharaoh’s harem. Later Abraham repeated that deception to King Abimelech, again to save his own life. In both incidences, Sarah was returned to Abraham, but through God’s intervention, not Abraham’s.

Then there’s the story of Abraham banishing his oldest son, Ishmael, and his son’s mother, Hagar, into the wilderness with only a skin of water and some bread. This was effectively a death sentence from a very wealthy man. With so few provisions, it was unlikely that Ishmael and Hagar would survive. Again, it was God who intervened to save them. Thus, at the time Abraham heard God calling him to sacrifice Isaac to show his faithfulness, Abraham’s predisposition to sacrificing his dependents for his own well-being was well established.

So perhaps God *was* speaking to Abraham – but if so, I doubt that Abraham understood. The Hebrew text actually bears that out in this story with its repetition of the verb ‘to see.’ To see is also to discern, to hear, and to understand, and to provide. Every time Abraham says, “Here I am,” what he’s literally saying is “See me.”<sup>5</sup> In the story, when God first spoke to Abraham, Abraham responded in actions – gathering the materials for the sacrifice and Isaac, but importantly, he does

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<sup>4</sup>Thanks to The Late Rev. Louisa Page who preached about this on April 8, 1999 in the course, “Teaching and Preaching Texts of Terror” at the Episcopal Divinity School. I’ve borrowed liberally from her sermon with her permission.

<sup>5</sup>Hineyni – or behold me.

not see or understand. His response really is blind obedience. Later he sees the mountain far off in the distance and when Isaac asks him where the sacrificial lamb is, he tells Isaac that God will provide, literally in Hebrew, God will see to it. What God sees, I think, that Abraham has it wrong and sends a messenger to intervene. When the messenger of the Lord tells Abraham to stop his sacrifice of Isaac, Abraham looks up, and in seeing the ram caught in the thicket, finally understands. Abraham names the place, “the Lord will provide,” or, in Hebrew, “the Lord will see.” What Abraham finally sees is that he needs to *put the knife down*. I wonder how long the messenger of the Lord was trying to get his attention. I wonder how long the messengers of the Lord have been trying to get our attention – to put our weapons down. How long have the messengers of the Lord been trying to help us see that violence is *always* the result of our inability to see, to hear, to understand. I wonder how long it will take until we see that violence is not God’s will.

One of the problems with looking after the fact at an outcome that includes violence or suffering, and proclaiming it the “will of God,” whether it is the story of the binding of Isaac or the crucifixion of Jesus, is that it can create a dead kind of faith in which the effects of privilege and oppression get confused with God’s desire. However something turned out, God must have wanted it that way, or God must have made it that way, or God must have permitted it. In this kind of faith, we ultimately bear no responsibility because God is controlling everything. Suffering becomes the will of God, a test of faith, even Jesus’ crucifixion becomes the will of God, a test of obedience, rather than Jesus’ death being the result of his living so fully in solidarity with people who were deemed unfit, that he himself became an enemy of the politically and religiously powerful who feared an uprising.

But before anyone gets to feeling too smug, thinking, ‘oh, that’s not the kind of faith I have. Heck, I don’t even believe in God.’ (and I myself often say that I think there’s a 50-50 chance that God exists) -- I wonder about the flip side – the idea that we ultimately bear no responsibility to discern God’s will because there is no God; or God exists but God has no will. And I don’t want to let ourselves off so easily. What is the fog of our social location that prevents us from seeing or understanding that the Holy One is in our midst all of the time? What education, what wealth, what citizenship, what intellectualism, what power disables our perception or our experience of our dependence on the Source of All Being?

I’m drawn to and challenged by Martin Buber’s words that “We shall accomplish nothing at all if we divide our world and our life into two domains: one in which God’s command is paramount, the other governed by the laws of economics, politics, and the ‘simple self-assertion’ of the group...Stopping one’s ears so as not to hear the voice from ...[God] is breaking the connection between existence and the meaning of existence.”<sup>6</sup> Understanding God’s word or God’s will has never been very easy as far as I can tell. Not in Abraham’s time, not in Jesus’ time, not in our time. What scripture may be holding up for us today is the complicated good news that, as the old saying goes, “Bidden or not bidden, God is present.” Perhaps we should say, “*Believe* it or not, God is present.” And perhaps the struggle to see, the struggle to hear the Holy One creates connection between existence and the meaning of existence. What scripture may be holding up for us today is the complicated good news that we gather in the name of God who desires to dwell with us and in us and that messengers from God are always along our path trying to get our attention. Let us pray for eyes to see and ears to hear and hearts to understand.

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<sup>6</sup>Martin Buber and Paul Mendes-Flohr, *A Land of Two Peoples* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 103.