

Sermon for June 19, 2022—“Akedah”

Twelfth Sunday in OT, Year C—Genesis 22:1-19

Abraham and Sarah laughed when they heard about the baby. Just a little while before the baby was born, they laughed themselves silly listening to this promise that God was making. They laughed until tears came streaming down their faces. How could they do anything else?

It’s pretty funny to think about two folks, near 100 years old, trying to raise a baby, never mind thinking about giving birth to one in the first place. Maybe they laughed because they didn’t believe it was possible. Maybe they laughed, because they did.

Of course, they named him, after their smiling little bundle of joy. The name Isaac means “he who laughs.” And on his eighth day, Isaac was consecrated to the Lord, as Abraham had been commanded to do. This child of unexpected and long-awaited promise, this child of laughter.

Abraham, however, was not laughing when he awoke with a start in the long hours of the still dark morning. Abraham was not laughing as he slipped out of bed, trying desperately not to disturb Sarah in her sleep. He went to the boy, his only remaining son, the one he loved, and told him to get dressed, that they had somewhere they had to go.

Abraham did not laugh as he remembered that morning only a few years before. That morning, not unlike this morning, when he went to his other son—Ishmael—and to the boy's mother—Hagar—and told them that they had to go. Abraham remembered the trusting look on Ishmael’s face, as he told him to take care of his mother. He remembered the quiet reproach in Hagar’s eyes, as she slipped wordlessly into the quiet desert.

Abraham did not laugh any more.

Slowly, Abraham, Isaac, and two servants, make their way towards Moriah towards the place where his troubling dream had told him he must sacrifice Isaac—his son, the son through whom the promise of God was to be fulfilled. As they leave the servants behind and make their way up the mountain, Isaac looks up at his father, “I can see the wood and the fire, but I cannot see the lamb.” Abraham, reaching for comfort, from behind his cold eyes, manages to say, “The Lord will see to that.”

Reaching the top, Abraham takes his son, his only son, and he binds him, and he lights the fire. Isaac does not struggle. He trusts his father, as children ought to be able to do. Abraham pulls out the knife and holds it high above his head. When the terrible moment comes, just as he is about to strike the killing blow, his hand his stayed by another voice. Abraham relents, and finally sees a ram caught in a thicket, offering that ram instead.

I must confess that I struggle with this story.

Having done a lengthy project in my earlier seminary days, having preached on it now a number of times in my career, more than on any other text, I still struggle to come to grips with it. Maybe it’s because I’ve done so much work on it, read and re-read so much commentary, both Jewish and Christian.

Believe me, there's so much going on here and so much written about it, that's it's really hard to know exactly what it all means. And let's face it, it's all just guesswork anyway, trying to figure out what God was thinking, then or now! In preparing to tackle it again this week, I've considered that, at the very least, this story is tied to the terrors that we sometimes experience. The terror of dying, and most especially, the terror of living with a memory of death.

The horror of this story is driven home when we read that Abraham took the knife to kill his son. Abraham was ready and willing, not to die for his faith, but to kill for it. The Hebrew words are even more frightening. The English word that best represents the Hebrew for knife—*maakeleth*—is actually a cleaver, and every word is associated, not with ritual sacrifice, but with the butchering of an animal. Abraham trusses his son, tying him up like an animal for the slaughter. Abraham holds the cleaver in his hand ready to kill his son.

In the years after this incident, we hear very little from Isaac. In fact, the story does not even make it clear that Isaac came back with his father. One old Jewish Midrash—one of many—claims that Abraham came back down the mountain, and that Isaac went down the other side, never again speaking to his father, to the one who had shattered his trust.

We don't hear Isaac speak at all, until he is on his deathbed passing along his blessing to a conniving and deceitful son. That son is Jacob, who will become Israel, the namesake of God's chosen people. The name that would mean blessing, and hope, and grace, to a world in sore need of all three. And later, when Jacob swears an oath, he swears it by the God of his fathers, he swears by the "God of Abraham, and the Terror of Isaac." Our own English translations do not do justice to the command that Abraham heard in his dream. It reads something like this:

"Abraham?"

"Here I am!"

"Take your son..."

"Your only son..."

"The one whom you love..."

"Take Isaac..."

"Take your son."

"I have two sons."

"Your only one."

"This one is an only one to his mother, and this one is an only one to his mother."

"The one whom you love."

"I love them both."

"Take Isaac."

This is a terrible story, full of pain.

If we refuse to hear the pain crying out from Abraham's heart as he is torn between the love of his son, and his love for God, the numerous times he'd failed God—then we lose something crucial about the story. This is not just one more step along Abraham's journey.

This is the climax of Abraham's life, the moment for which he will be remembered. This is the moment which will haunt his thoughts, his memories, and all his unspoken prayers from that time on. This is the moment from which he will return broken to pieces to bury his wife, and finally, to await his own death. Many people have said that this is a story about being willing to sacrifice anything for God, even something as precious as a child. That may very well be.

Now, I'm not a father, and so I can only imagine the terror that must have seized Abraham as he pondered the voice that he heard a voice that had asked so much of him through the years. Other interpreters have looked past Isaac altogether, saying that he merely represented the promise of God, and that Abraham, in being faithful to the end, was willing to trust that God would find a way to fulfill his promise.

But it's almost impossible for me, as a Christian, to look past Isaac, and to say that he was not a boy, but a promise. To say that he was not a human being, but merely a means to an end. I simply cannot do that. We are all children of God, without question. But none of us—ever—are just a means to an end. No one, especially not a child, is disposable. Especially not in God's eyes.

So, should we try to accept the interpretations we've been given over the course of our lives? Or are we—instead—set with the task of finding new ways of broadening our understanding of God, and what it means to be in relationship with God—finding new ways of seeking the presence of God in the midst of these ancient problems that confront us even now? Probably not a bad idea, but that is no small challenge. And it begins in the very first verse. The words are right there, right at the beginning of the story: "...God tested Abraham." I looked at about a dozen different translations, and all but one, the King James Version, (which uses "tempts"), used the word "tested."

Now, as I think I've said before, I don't think God tests or tempts people on a routine, daily basis. But lots of people take the Bible literally, and there's lots of biblical evidence that suggests that God does. And for that reason many have assumed for so long that Abraham's faith was being tested. That may very well be, though I'm still not convinced. In any case, it's not as easy question, for which there's an easy answer. The writer of this story, whom many presume to be Moses, certainly seemed to think that God tested people, as he recorded for posterity this already ancient story. And Moses would certainly know.

At first glance this is what we see a man willing to sacrifice his own son because God told him to do so. Thousands of years of interpretation call this a story about faithfulness, and on any number of levels it is very much that. Many say that this is a subtle protest against human sacrifice. I get that too.

For a very long time, the Christian tradition sees this story as a typology of Jesus, God being willing to sacrifice his own son. Even the parts about the son carrying the wood up the hill, which legend tells us that it would eventually become the hill outside Jerusalem known by the name Calvary, the hill upon which Jesus would die. And then there's the reference to the ram being paralleled in Jesus, coming to be known as the "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." Seems like a no-brainer to me.

So, when all is said and done we've taken an ancient Jewish story about a faithful man, and a very questionable act, and assumed that this story, has something to do with our redemption. But, as I often do, I'm going to ask the question, "What if...?" What if this story is **not** a foreshadowing of the redemption of the world? What if this story is not a description of faithfulness?

What if, instead, this story is a description of the fall; a story of sin, and a world out of touch with the love of God? What if Abraham's test was just that, a real test? And what if, for centuries, we've been wrong in assuming that Abraham passed his test? What if the real test was whether Abraham was willing to stand up, as a real father should, for himself and for his family and say NO? No to death. No to killing. What if Abraham's leap of faith was a leap in the wrong direction?

Part of the reason I chose this reading for today, with today being Father's Day, is the picture it paints of Abraham as a father. When you look at the story in the broader biblical account of his story, Abraham has failed to protect the dignity of every one of his family members. First by offering his wife Sarah to the Egyptian pharaoh to protect his own life. Then by sending his oldest son away to placate the jealousy that Abraham himself had helped to create, between Sarah and Hagar. And now, when he has one more chance, when it seems that his choice must be clear, Abraham yet again stands aside when he should be standing firm.

Brothers and sisters, here's the thing: For centuries, Jewish interpreters have seen the ram as the most important part of the story. The ram is the symbol of the fact that in the end, God stopped Abraham from committing this terrible act. A ram's horn—called the shofar—is blown every year on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, marking beginning of ten days of penitence that culminates on Yom Kippur, the "Day of Atonement." The shofar is blown to "remind" God that ultimately God was opposed to human sacrifice, and that in the end, God will keep all of his promises.

As if God needed the reminder!

For these Jewish interpreter, the most important action was God stopping Abraham from killing his son Isaac. Just as for Christians—especially Protestants—the key moment is NOT when Christ is lifted up onto the cross, but rather when he is raised from death into new life. The power of the cross comes only through the power and redemption of the empty tomb.

So—what if Abraham failed his test, as we so often fail ours? And what if God did, what God always does? What if God redeemed Abraham, and sent him on his way, promise intact? What if this story is about the forgiveness and faithfulness, not of one man—but of the forgiveness and faithfulness God?

Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.