

## Sermon for 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, June 28, 2020

Reading: Genesis 22:1-14

The Old Testament lesson of Abraham and Isaac, known by many Jews as the *Akedah* or binding, both repulses and fascinates me every time I read it. Rick Marrs write: “The passage throbs with drama, for it contains the stuff of which life is made. It treats fear and faith; it pulsates with conflict—conflict of the past, present and future; of faith and justice; of obedience and defiance; of freedom and sacrifice.” E. Speiser writes: “...and the two walked on together,’ covers what is perhaps the most poignant and eloquent silence in all literature.”

As we read last week in Genesis, Abraham allowed the jealousy of his wife Sarah to influence him to send off his first child Ishmael and Hagar his mother (Sarah’s maidservant) to what would have been an almost certain death in the wilderness, had God not intervened. And, today we have Abraham, seemingly willing to kill Isaac, his son and heir, because of the voice he hears from God. It’s rather remarkable and chilling that the same man who argues with and questions God five times about God’s plan to destroy the city of Sodom, filled with people he does not know, does not question God about his directive to kill his son Isaac. Are there not stories in the media of insane parents, killing their babies and children because of the voices they have heard, believing them from God? And do we not have people today thinking they are legitimate and have God’s blessing in killing others? Does Abraham think God’s covenant and promise to him suddenly mean nothing?

In the Episcopal Church, when we feel that we are being called by God, we are encouraged – indeed, required, if it is a call to ordination – to test our understanding of our call within the Christian community. We have not only the interior conversation with ourselves and with God, sometimes over the course of years, but also with our families, with psychologists, with spiritual directors, with our rectors, with church and diocesan committees, and with our bishop. Our sense of call from God involves a careful process of discernment and assent from the community of faith in which we are rooted that helps keep us grounded and honest about our messages from God.

St. Andrew’s search committee is working on documents which convey its identity and its vision for potential candidates for rector of this parish. They are working together, listening to each other, listening to the parish, and, above all, listening to God as to where and whom God is calling you to be. Rob Voyle, an Episcopal priest, psychologist, and the director of the Clergy Leadership Institute, poses seven questions that might be helpful to consider in your process. And as I think about the vestry decision to hold off opening our sanctuary for public worship out of our sense that love requires it, these questions also apply: (1) What do we want to do, or not want to do? (2) What is God calling us to do? (3) What should we do? (4) What is love calling us to do? (5) What is fear calling us to do? (6) What is guilt calling us to do? And finally (7) What is Wisdom (the Spirit) calling us to do?

Which of these potential questions/voices was Abraham possibly hearing? He hears what he believes is the voice of God: “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.” Is there something about the threat to everything he has held on to all these years that God’s request involves that leads him to respond as he does? On some deep level did he not trust God sufficiently or the image of God in himself?

Consulting no one, Abraham gets up early in the morning and sets out with his son and two servants. Abraham has given up a lot before – his home and everything that is familiar, to follow God’s call. Perhaps he is sure, now, of God’s voice because of his familiarity with it. But this request is even more incredible, because if he follows his understanding of God’s call and sacrifices his son, he also gives up God’s promise to him, to make him the father of nations, and he even gives up his identity as a righteous man.

Are we called by God to give up everything? To lose our lives in order to regain them? Isn’t that what Jesus calls us to? What if we give up everything and then discover we are wrong? Is this not what our faith tells us of the Father, giving up his son Jesus on the cross?

The Bible does not contain stories for sissies. I hope we all know that faith has never been and is not now for the faint-hearted. Faith is for those willing to/called to contend with God, the One in whose image they

are created. These stories should lead us to consider the God we worship; they should lead us to seek God's forgiveness when we get it wrong.

These stories are both rooted in the particulars of narrative history and in the universal nature of humanity. They might best enlist our commitment to a lifetime of learning and struggling with them and with the Word of God, even as the scriptures are for life and also for comfort. Some of the stories in the Bible are believed to be so very ancient that they predate the events told in the scriptures, just as some of what we think of as Christian holidays – Christmas, Easter – are crafted on to earlier pagan celebrations. But to suggest that our text for today is simply a very old Semitic story that illustrates a positive changeover from child to animal sacrifice, as some scholars have suggested, begs the question. It's more like a conundrum. Does God always come in to save us from ourselves at the last minute?

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann suggests “between the two statements of *divine inscrutability* stands verse 8 (*God himself will provide*). This “statement of utter trust and confidence” is also “quite open-ended.” Abraham “turns from his own way to the way of God which lies beyond his understanding...but upon which he is prepared to act in concrete ways.” He is offered the deepest mystery of human faith and pathos. Moreover, Brueggemann suggests that this is not simply a game of God, this testing of Abraham, but that God really wants to know who Abraham is. And that is settled in verse 12, “Now I know.” He suggests this passage is “a genuine movement in the history between Yahweh and Abraham.”

We obviously cannot settle our interpretation of this story today—it suggests something about the multiple layers of many stories in the bible, cautions us against easy interpretations or certainties that our sense of rational discourse and logic should be able to encompass God. Our story is a lens through which we can glimpse the sovereignty and freedom of God who requires our obedience and God's grace which provides beyond our imagining and beyond our human hearts. Martin Luther finally wrote that “this contradiction of testing and providing (of the promise of Isaac, the taking of Isaac, and the late rescue of Isaac) will only be reconciled in the word of God. Short of the word of God, our reason and our faith are baffled.”

Molly Phinney Baskette writes: “Sometimes, we need to shake our fists at heaven.... Maybe that's why these stories are here.... Sometimes you just have to face the darkness, and live with the sadness. And yes, sometimes, God does swoop in at the last second to make things come right, or at least, more right than they were..... Sometimes, only almost dying will teach you what life is worth.”

And for Christians, all our reading of scripture must somehow be linked to the mystery and reality of Jesus Christ – his faithful relationship to the Father, his choosing out of love to offer up his life in sacrifice for the whole world in his crucifixion, his promise to dwell within us, and God's providing beyond imagining in his resurrection that gives us the amazing promise of life and love in God in the face of every deathly circumstance. And this new life begins in the water and the mystery of our baptisms, dying with Christ so that we, too, may rise with him.