

Are You Kidding Me?

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

Genesis 22:1-14

Pastor Bill Chadwick September 17, 2017

Before I read this passage let's place it in context. The first 11 chapters of Genesis are often called "pre-history." We can consider them as teaching stories, not as actual factual events. These include the two creation accounts, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the Flood, the Tower of Babel...

Now as we come to the person of Abraham in Genesis chapter 12 we move into a more nebulous situation. One commentator notes: These stories about Abraham "may be total myth like Romulus and Remus, or embellished reality like King Arthur." I choose to think that Abraham was a real, historical person. If so, he lived somewhere around 1600 BCE.

The passage today, from Genesis 22 comes some 30 years or so after the call of Abraham and Sarah to leave their country and their kinfolk and follow where God leads.

Now listen to Genesis 22:1-14

The Command to Sacrifice Isaac

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ² He said, "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." ³ So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. ⁴ On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. ⁵ Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you." ⁶ Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. ⁷ Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt

offering?”⁸ Abraham said, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So the two of them walked on together.

⁹ When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” ¹² He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” ¹³ And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴ So Abraham called that place “The LORD will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.”

Well well well. Whose idea was it anyway to use the new narrative lectionary? Not surprisingly, this story never shows up in the three years of the Revised Common Lectionary. In 40 years of preaching I have managed to avoid this story entirely.

But I’m committed to follow through on this narrative lectionary, so I wrestled with this passage and I’m glad for it. I found insights by a Methodist pastor named John Nash to be especially insightful and thought-provoking.

So here we go. The first thing we note is that this story is extremely spare. It’s all plot. We aren’t told exactly how old Isaac is. There are no adjectives to describe the journey or the mountain. But what is most striking—and I would say extremely disappointing and frustrating—is there is no indication of what anyone is thinking or feeling. We don’t know how Abraham FEELS about what he’s asked to do, or whether he argued with God about it, or what if anything he told his wife Sarah, either before or after the trek up the mountain. The narrator doesn’t tell us what *Isaac* feels about this, or even what God feels about it. This story could only have been written by a man. (Nash)

The passage begins with three innocuous-seeming words, “After these things.” What are these things? It’s important to know.

First, God called Abraham and Sarah to leave their home and kindred and to go where God leads them. And in obedience they went!

Second. On Abraham and Sarah's journey they encounter various powerful men in these lands through which they pass. Abraham fears that these men might kill Abraham in order to take Sarah as their wife. So two times Abraham passes Sarah off as his sister so that the leaders will treat Abraham well, instead of killing him. In other words, Abraham is not trusting God. (Side note: In fact, Abraham's wife Sarah is Abraham's half-sister... It's the Old Testament.)

Third. God has promised that Abraham and Sarah will have descendants more numerous than the stars, but it ain't happenin'. They have no children. And they are old, 75 and 66 when they left their homeland. Impatiently, Sarah comes up with her own plan to have children. And Abraham goes along with it. Sarah gives Abraham her maidservant Hagar to bear children for her, and a son is born, named Ishmael. Later, miraculously, the 90 year-old Sarah does conceive and bears a son named Isaac. Then Sarah demands that Abraham expel Hagar and Ishmael into the desert, which Abraham does.

John Nash notes that "What we see in these stories is that God has always been faithful to what God has promised to Abraham, even when Abraham has tried to play around with how those results are going to come about,...Abraham has not always necessarily been faithful to God, or at least has not always trusted God to do what God says will happen."

So, on the face of it here in Chapter 22 God is truly testing Abraham, because Abraham has not been entirely trustworthy. God needs to know. Can Abraham be trusted to carry out his role in God's plans for him and for the world, or perhaps does God need to find another? So God creates a test for Abraham. A heckuva test.

God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, (again Ishmael, the first son, has disappeared into the wilderness)...take your only son, Isaac, whom you love (the first time in the Bible the word 'love' is mentioned), and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering..."

What?! What do we do with this story?

I don't know.

Let me give you a few possibilities, what I call "Think-withs."

The first is to ask, did God really mean it? Did God want Abraham to follow through? John Nash again: "I can actually imagine that when God first asks this of Abraham, that God expects Abraham to reject it...and then once Abraham starts the journey I can imagine God saying ... "Is he actually going to do this? Is he crazy?" And then God

looks for a way to solve the problem.” Nash concludes, “I imagine that because I don’t want to imagine that God was serious about the demand.”

It gives us a horrifying picture of God. I can think of six or seven other Old Testament stories that leave me in dismay and disgust. For example, four or five hundred years after Abraham, Moses leads the Israelites out of captivity into the Promised Land. Now the “promised land” was already occupied. According to the Bible God told the Israelites to take this land by force, and frequently the command was to kill every man, woman, child, dog, donkey and bunny already there. And when they sometimes left a few survivors God was furious with them.

Really? Well, that’s what the Bible says.

I have come to think that the people didn’t always correctly understand what God was calling them to do, that the writers of these accounts ascribed to God things that really weren’t God’s commands. I could be wrong. But I’d really like to think that they misunderstood what God wanted. At the very least, as we use the Bible for our authority today, as Presbyterians we are to view everything through the lens of Jesus. Does this action fit with what we know of Jesus’ words and deeds?

In future sermons and in the Discipleship 101 class we will talk about the progression of biblical ethics, the psychological maturation, if you will, that we find as we move through the First Testament, from the Torah to the Prophets to the Writings.

To illustrate this point about whether the biblical writers, or Abraham himself, really understood what God wanted Pastor Mark Zabriskie observes that “We may wonder, “What did Abraham tell his wife when he returned home?” We don’t know. What we do know is that Sarah died soon after, perhaps from a broken heart or perhaps (terrified) by her husband and the God whom he worshipped. What relationship could Abraham have had with his son after such a monstrous undertaking? We hear nothing further about Isaac until he was on his deathbed, paralyzed, half blind and almost deaf. Surely, he must have been traumatized by what took place... And interestingly enough, there is no record in the Bible of God ever speaking again to Abraham. Perhaps Abraham was not hearing God’s voice after all.”

So the first possibility is that the story is simply wrong. God did not actually command Abraham to sacrifice his son. People have been known to misunderstand God’s will—slavery, the extermination of native Americans, the subjugation of women, the Holocaust, and so on.

Second think-with. A common interpretation of this passage is that it was a teaching tool to instruct the Hebrews not to practice child sacrifice, like so many of their neighbors did. Indeed, there are numerous later biblical injunctions against child sacrifice.

Child sacrifice. How horrible and unthinkable. Yet we might well ask, “Upon what altars do we sacrifice our children?” Some of us sacrifice our children on the altars of commerce and materialism, giving them things instead of our time. Stage mothers and sports fathers push their kids to shine in order to feed the parents’ egos. “We take some of our children and train them to be soldiers and send them elsewhere to kill other children trained for the same tasks, and sometimes it is even literally children that are killing and being killed.” (Nash) Child sacrifice.

A third possibility. Scholars tell us that the book of Genesis is a compilation edited together from four different sources. This editing likely took place during the time of Jewish exile in Babylon, roughly 1000 years after the time of Abraham. Try to imagine being in exile. Your country has been vanquished and you have been hauled off to live in the enemy’s country. Imagine being hauled off to live in Iraq or North Korea. The Jews were fearful for their very survival as a people. They were desperately looking for words of hope. This story in Genesis 22 has a very happy ending: God will provide and Isaac lives. Had Isaac died, there would never have been a people known as Israel. (His son was Jacob, later renamed Israel.) So yes, things are bad here in exile, but Israel will continue. Perhaps some Israelite writer in Babylon crafted this story as a word of encouragement: God will provide and we will survive.

Fourth. The New Interpreter’s Bible sees in this story a foreshadowing of the experience of Jesus, who was also tested. God puts Jesus through a time of testing in the wilderness to see if Jesus will be faithful and thus can “be a vehicle for God’s redemptive purposes in the world. Even more (Jesus goes) through a time of testing in the Garden of Gethsemane (the night of his arrest)...Jesus trusts himself to the will of God, trusting that God will find a way to be faithful to the promises even in the face of death. And God does prove faithful in raising Jesus from the dead.” (Vol 1. p. 501.)

Jesus was faithful.

God is faithful.

May we be found faithful.

Amen? Amen!