

Abraham's Faith

2 Pentecost/Proper 8, Year A

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Genesis 22:1-14 – Abraham's Sacrifice of Isaac

Last week I told you about one of my hobbies – sewing vestments. But I also like to read mystery novels. About half of the way through the book I start getting anxious and I am not sure how it's going to end. So sometimes, to relieve my anxiety, I do the unthinkable – I skip to the end to find out how it ends. I just want to make sure my hero or heroine will be safe. Many of you probably think I've broken some cardinal rule about not reading the last page of the book. And most of the people I've talked to won't cheat and look at the end. But if I know the ending I can relax and just enjoy the characters, scenery and plot and not be anxious about what will happen. What I'm doing is avoiding the anxiety.

Today we do not get to avoid the anxiety. The lesson from Genesis that we read today is one of the most difficult passages in all of scripture – God's testing of Abraham. Abraham is asked by God to take his son Isaac and to sacrifice him as a burnt offering to God. What are we going to do with this passage?

We don't like to think that the God we know – the God who loves us would even be a part of child sacrifices, and herein lays the source of our anxiety. We are looking at this passage after all the stories of the oral tradition, the history of Israel, and all the writings of the Hebrew Scriptures were compiled and collected. We are looking at this story 2000 years after the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. We look at this passage from the vantage of knowing the end of the story.

And we are not alone in this. In preparing for this sermon I read many commentaries and sermons to get the “experts” take on this. All of them were coming at this story having the rest of scripture and our modern understanding of the context of the times behind them. Even the Jewish scholars were using the psalms and the book of Job as ways of understanding this passage.

One interpretation is that by God rescuing Isaac He is prohibiting child sacrifices that were prevalent during those times – however this is not yet mentioned in scripture.

The most prominent Christian interpretation is that this passage prefigures Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross. Isaac carries his own wood just as Jesus carries his own cross. Isaac is bound and Christ is nailed to the cross. God spared Abraham’s son because he knew there would be another sacrifice hundreds of years later.

Both of these interpretations are reasonable and make a lot of sense. But they come from our knowledge of the whole story.

What if we were to look at this passage from another point of view? What if we looked at it as if we didn’t know the end of the story? This story is only in the 22nd chapter of Genesis, the first book of the Torah, the first book of the Bible. There is a deliberate flow in the order of the books of the bible and I think we need consider that when we look for understanding of this passage. So far in the bible we are just getting to learn about God, God’s creation, and God’s people. At this point we do not know very much.

- We know God as creator

- We know there is a relationship between God and Mankind and Mankind and the earth
- We know God started having trouble with mankind – first w/ Adam and Eve, then with Cain.
- We know there was further rebellion and God started over with Noah and his descendents.

And now we come to the story of Abraham. It starts in Chapter 12 when God calls Abraham out of his home country of Ur to a new land. He is obedient and takes his whole family and leaves behind everything he has known. Abraham goes through many trials – he passes his wife off as his sister; his nephew Lot gets in trouble in Sodom and Gomorrah, but God is with him all the way. God sees something in Abraham and so he enters into a covenant with Abraham. God promises Abraham descendents as numerous as the stars.

God is learning that Abraham is different than those he's had a relationship with in the past. Unlike Adam, Abraham was obedient. He left his home when called by God to go to another land and become the father of many nations. Abraham is learning that with God anything is possible. At the age of 99 he becomes a father just as God promised. Isaac is the first-born of the promise of God.

Maybe now God has found someone he can trust as well. So God decides to test Abraham.

The word for test here is not a pass/fail kind of test. It's more like testing or proving metal to see how much it can take. This testing also makes the metal stronger. God knows it is a test, but Abraham does not. But Abraham is obedient, leaving immediately. Along the journey Isaac asks an important question: Where

is the lamb for the sacrifice? Abraham's response is one of faith – God will provide. God has provided before. Abraham had no reason to believe He would not this time. That was what his experience with God up until this point. There is also indication in the text that this is what Abraham expected since he told the servants to wait for both of them to return.

God is taking a risk here as well. What if Abraham ignores the covenant and refuses God and walks away – will all the work with him be in vain? It's happened before.

Finally we get to the mountain and there is no indication that Isaac fought his father. Abraham probably explained it to him and he accepted his fate also in obedience to God. This would be expected as Abraham taught Isaac about all God. Finally, at the climax of the story, at the last minute, God intervened. He saw Abraham's faith and obedience and provided the lamb for the sacrifice. God named the place Jehovah-Jirah – God provides. And in the next couple of verses that we didn't read, Abraham's obedience and faith was credited as righteousness. At last God has found someone on whom to start his kingdom on earth and the covenant was renewed.

The promise of God was met with obedience from Abraham. The covenantal relationship is now complete. And we learned something new about Abraham. Here was a man of profound faith in God. He was obedient and risked giving up the very thing God had promised him.

We also learned something about God. God provided what was needed – he provided the necessary sacrifice. God also found someone who was obedient and did not withhold anything from God.

Does this take away all the anxiety from the story? No, and I don't think we have to do that. There is anxiety in following God. We cannot avoid it. We don't always know how the story ends. We learn that God will provide what we need in anxious times or even in unforeseen and unfair tragedy. It may not be what we expect – but God is not far off. A recent example is the birth of premature twin sons Owen and Levi to some friends of our family. Levi did not survive and Owen is fighting for his life. Now at 26 weeks of age, Owen is trying to suck his thumb. But he's not out of the woods yet. Neil and Lynn, their parents, are devout Christians, but they are struggling with their faith at times. Neil even has talked in his blog about not understanding God's plan in all of this. While I don't think this was God's plan, God is providing them with all that they need. They feel the prayers of a community that stretches across the country.

Genesis 22 is a story of life coming into a situation of death; a story of redemption; a story of faith in the midst of extreme trauma. It is a story of a God who provides. It is true that it is sometimes difficult to see God's provision and goodness in desperate situations when tragedy strikes. Nevertheless, the text calls upon us to look up and see God's goodness breaking into situations of despair.

Abraham and Neil have learned that faith doesn't help us avoid troubling times. They have learned that faith is what gets us through them. This is what we can take with us from this difficult text in Genesis - and it even stands on its own without the rest of the story.