

July 2, 2017/12th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Genesis 22:1-14; Matthew 10:40-42;

Rev. Joel M. Krueger

"On Sacrifice"

So, last week, Kate thought *she* had a difficult reading to work with! Well, this passage from Genesis on the Testing of Abraham, referred to as the "Akedah", may be just as difficult if not more so. It has disturbed and raised questions in scholars and just about anybody who has read and tried to understand this story for centuries, and I have long struggled with it as well.

How are we to understand a god who asks, who instructs a man to kill, to murder, to sacrifice his son, his only son, whom he loves, more than life itself. And in the broader story, how do we understand that same God, who called this man, Abram, to leave his home and his country (12:1-4), to travel to an unknown place; a God who makes a covenant with this man and his wife Sarai (15:1-21), promising to give them a progeny that will be numerous as the stars and become a great nation, in fact, a multitude of nations; who continues that covenant by requiring the mutilation of the flesh, circumcision, to be a sign in the body of those faithful to that covenant; and who then finally, after many years, fulfills the promise of this covenant by giving them a son in their old age, Isaac.

How are we to understand this story, obviously a story about obedience and faithfulness. And in this particular passage, a story of testing, of the continued testing and trial of one, Abraham, who is then asked to sacrifice, not himself, a test that would have itself required great courage but one that may have been less difficult than what God ultimately asked.

But for God to ask him to sacrifice his son, his only son . . . (actually, he had another son, Ishmael, the son of Hagar the Egyptian slave of Sarah, whom, Abraham had driven out into the wilderness at the request of Sarah, after Isaac was born. Though it pained him to do so, God had assured him that Ishmael too would become the father of a nation. But the reality which Abraham knew full well, was that they would have slim chance of surviving in the wilderness. And Abraham's actions were nothing less than reckless abandonment, sending them to their death).

But it was Isaac who was Abraham's pride and joy, the light of his life. He loved him with all his heart. He was the fulfillment of the promise for which Abraham had longed and lived for. And now, the God who gave this most precious gift to him, was asking him to give it back. And so again, we have to ask, what kind of a God would do this? And of course we must also ask, what kind of man, what kind of father would listen to a God who would ask such a thing?

Traditional understandings of this passage have included the idea that this story represents the decision of the Hebrew people to not accept the practice of child sacrifice known in the ancient Canaanite cultures of that region. That Abraham may have been influenced by that surrounding culture, misinterpreting it as the call of his God to prove his faithfulness, and concluding with the intervention of God that stopped him, leading to Israel's practice of animal sacrifice, and showing God's true desire to provide and give blessing.

In his commentary on this passage, Walter Brueggemann says that this is not a story about child sacrifice, or so much a story about the testing of Abraham, as it is really a story about God. That as the "*tester*" in the beginning of the story, we are shown the nature of *God's free sovereignty*, God's ability to do and choose as God so desires. Yet also, as "*provider*" at the end of the story, where we

are shown the nature of *God's gracious faithfulness*, where God provides what is needed to save the child. The lesson Abraham learns (as we are to learn as well) is that these two characteristics of God, *free sovereignty and gracious faithfulness*, are always present always encountered *together* as we experience God.

Then there is another take on this story, provided to me by Kenn Ortmann. It is the argument put forward by a responder to a commentary by Julianna Claassens citing the work of Omri Boehm (Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the New School for Social Research: "The Binding of Isaac: An Inner Biblical Polemic on the Question of Disobeying a Manifestly Illegal Order" (Vetus Testamentum 52 (1): 1--12). (www.workingpreacher.org)

Boehm basically says that the story we have is the result of at least 2 re-writings or redactors. That the original story was very much like what we have except that at the end, Abraham, with knife in hand, realizes the wrongfulness of what God had instructed him to do. That is, to kill his son Isaac. At that point, seeing that God is not intervening, Abraham *refuses* to be obedient to God, *refuses* to do God's will, and finds the ram to offer as sacrifice instead. Boehm's proposal is that the final redactor couldn't stand the idea that anyone could get away with *disobedience* to God, and therefore changed the story.

The question for me is, what kind of God is this? Does God call us to sacrifice? Certainly, we no longer practice animal sacrifice, and the prophets of the Old Testament clearly stated God's preference there:

For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings. (Hosea 6:6)
I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. / Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. (Isaiah 1:11, 16-17)
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. / But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream. (Amos 5:21-24)

The prophets made it pretty clear. The God we worship is less interested in any outward offerings, but more about the heart of a person, how we live. Jesus lived a life of self-giving. We might say he answered God's call to sacrifice in the way he lived his life. He lived to show the love of God to the world. He lived a life full of God's compassion. He knew hope and joy and he committed himself to a life so rooted in God's justice and mercy that the result, the consequence of that life, brought him face to face with the power structures of this world. And while his life was taken from him, we celebrate the resurrection as God's final word of blessing and provision. Jesus embodied a God who gives fully of God's self for the creation. This is the God we worship.

As we in America prepare to celebrate our nation, may we take time to remember the sacrifice of those who have given of themselves in many ways for their communities and our country. May we lift up the causes of their self-giving: life, liberty, freedom, justice, equality, unity, peace. May we acknowledge the ways God calls each of us to give of ourselves in love and compassion for one another.

And may we know that as we gather together as the body of Christ, as we share in this sacrament together, that we are never alone, that we do this work together, carrying one another through even the most difficult times and trials, knowing in all of it that our God is one who does provide, who calls us to walk in the way of Christ, and who blesses us with the power and joy of the Holy Spirit. Amen.