

4th Sunday after Pentecost, yr. a, 6/28/2020
Genesis 22:1-14; Matthew 10:37-42
At What Cost – Rev. Dr. Deborah M. Jenks

Again, like last week, I thought about not reading the passage from Genesis concerning God testing Abraham (traditionally testing his faith) by telling him to offer his son Isaac as a burnt offering – the promised son who was to fulfill God's covenant with Abraham to make of him a great nation. It's a frightening story. Who is God that God would ask this? But as I considered jettisoning the text I also thought of how central this story is to 3 great religions who consider Abraham to be the father of their faith – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Maybe it is too easy to gloss over this story.

Lately I've found myself thinking about what it means to be a person of faith, a disciple of Jesus Christ, and what it means for us all to be Christ's church in this world. In the midst of this wondering, I've had two images burning themselves into my heart. One is really a set of many images – images we likely consider "normal"; the images of everything we in our lives and in our culture believe we can and should have and need to live the "good life", the life we deserve and desire – images that are offered to us as if there is little if any cost to such a life for ourselves or for other people or for this earth. The other image burning its way into my heart is that of strangely joyful and zealous Christians – or Muslims, or Jews, or folk of any religion - who are convinced that the unrighteous and those of little, not-strong-enough faith will face harsh judgment,

while the righteous, the elect will in the end have it all, will be protected from harm, exempt for the suffering that is to come with God's terrible judgment.

What is so unsettling for me is how easily we human beings can fall into the temptation to believe in all sincerity that the blessings and benefits and comforts and abundance we have and experience are ours by right and we don't need to give much thought to the cost our living brings to others. Or maybe if we are aware that there is a cost to be borne, it is worth the price. Anything is worth the price if we can by that price guarantee that "God is on our side" (or we are on the side of God) and at least we and maybe those nearest and dearest can be saved from suffering and hard choices. Which brings me back around to this story of Abraham and Isaac.

Christians traditionally call it "The Testing of Abraham" – The Jewish people call it "The Binding of Isaac". And I started thinking that the difference in titles is ground for fruitful exploration – for dealing with this hard story.

God called to Abraham and said to him. "Abraham!" And Abraham said, "Here I am." God said, "Take you son, you only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the mountain of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering ... " ... On their way, Isaac said to his father, "Father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." Isaac said, " ...where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God himself will provide." ... When they came to the mountain that God had shown

him, Abraham built an altar. ... He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar. ... Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy ... for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son from me." (Gen. 22:1 ff.)

The scripture challenges us with questions that cut to the heart of our desire to live our lives with integrity, to live lives faithful to God's commandments and to the discipleship to which we are called in Christ Jesus. Just what is God asking of us as people of faith? How high a cost does living in faith require? What is God requiring of us? That we make sacrifices?

"Here I am ... here I am ... here I am." Perhaps, like Abraham, like Jesus, we over and over again need to respond to God in our prayers and actions and even in our questions, with these words "Here I am" – words that open our hearts and minds and souls to be receptive, attentive, responsive to God's saving grace and light – unless we keep responding to God "Here I am", we will find ourselves living and acting in ways that bear a terrible cost, especially for others. Think of it – if Abraham has closed his ears, his heart, mind and soul, to any one of those three calls – from God, from his son, from God – Isaac would be dead, God's promise would be unfulfilled, and Abraham's and Sarah's lives destroyed. Unless we continually open ourselves up to God and the hard questions that God asks of us, we will find ourselves soon tangled up in conflicting mixed up motives

and desires and hurting one another because we confuse God's will with our own. We imagine God wants us to sacrifice our children to some imagined demand – such as war, or marriage, or some desire of ours or sense of what is right or good. But if we are attentive and responsive, saying to God “Here I am ... Here I am” – we may discover that it is not God who demands these things, but us.

William Wilimon, who was chaplain for years at Duke University, writes in a commentary of this Genesis passage about teaching this story from Genesis with his wife Patsy in an intergenerational Church School setting. They showed a video to both the children and adults dramatizing the story, and then divided into two groups – one for children and the other adults – for discussion and an activity. Wilimon writes that his wife Patsy asked the children, “Who knows what the word ‘sacrifice’ means?” A few hands went up, a definition was attempted. “But what does sacrifice mean to you?” she continued.

“My dad and mom are doctors,” said a third grader. “And they help sick people to be better. Every day they do operations to help people.” “And how is that a sacrifice?” Patsy asked. The little girl was not finished. “And I go to the Day Care Center after school. Sometimes on Saturdays too. Mom and dad want to take me home, but they're busy so lots of times I stay at the Center.” Every child there from six to eleven nodded in agreement. They knew what she was talking about.

Meanwhile the discussion among the adults was getting off to a slow start. Wilimon asked, "But what does this old story mean to us? Would anybody think that God wanted them to sacrifice their child like this?" "God still does," interrupted an older woman, "God still does." Quietly, with tears forming in her eyes, she said, "We sent our son to college. He got an engineering degree. But he got involved in a church. He married a girl in the church. Then they had a baby, our only grandchild. Now he says God wants him to be a missionary and go to Lebanon. And take our grandbaby too." Someone else was crying, a young woman, a new member of the congregation. "Gloria wants me to tell you," said the woman sitting next to her with her arm around her, "that her husband left her and the two children last week. She wants us to pray for her."

A modern commentary on the "Binding of Isaac" from the Jewish tradition says this: The two strongest imperatives of Torah (the Law of Moses) are: 1) Rear children; 2) Break idols. What happens when we turn our children into idols? (This is what Abraham was doing.) We must break our idolization of them – kill the image we have erected into our idol, since by idolizing them we are blowing off the Breath of Life. This is what God asked of Abraham: Lift him up to ME: But Abraham had so totally made Isaac into an idol that he couldn't fathom how to do it without killing him. The lifted knife was the breaking of the idol: That was all God wanted ... all God needed. (Source: The Shalom Center web page)

The real question for us is not would we ever sacrifice ourselves or our children? Would God ever ask it of us? We make such sacrifices all the time. The real question for us is to whom, and for whom will we sacrifice all that we hold dear? And there is no easy, painless answer to the question, because the reality of our living and the gift of life God gives each of us is that living requires us to make such choices. And any choice, any commitment we make, means the sacrifice of something else. There is always a cost. There's no way around it – at least no way around it that doesn't cost for someone. Which brings me back to Isaac.

I wonder if this story is so important to us – to Christians, Jews, and Muslims – because of Isaac, not Abraham. Perhaps there is something profound to be learned by people of faith, about our faith, when considering this to be about the Binding of Isaac, not testing the faith of Abraham. It dawns on me that while Isaac was bound on the altar of sacrifice by his father Abraham, he was unbound by God, freed at least to some extent from the weight of the promise and the expectations laid on him. But this freedom was at a cost.

The Bible says very little about Isaac after this account of his binding in sacrifice by his father Abraham. All we really know is that he is unbound – set free by God's action. He is next seen in Genesis walking in the fields as a young man – understood in the rabbinic commentaries as meditating or communing, the only patriarch described as engaging in this practice. (Plaut, et al. 1981) It is

while doing this that Isaac first sees his future wife Rebekah. (Again only Isaac among the patriarchs is actually described as loving his wife.) Later we learn that he has twin sons, Esau and Jacob. That he deeply loves his sons is evident in the way they break his heart. Unlike his father Abraham, or his own sons, Isaac is the only patriarch to never leave the land that was to be Israel, the only one to take up agriculture, and the only one to befriend the Philistines and not make war with them, (The Bedside Torah, 2001). Although Isaac seemingly lives within the boundaries of all God promised Abraham, he also seems to have chosen his own path ... at great cost. Maybe some of Isaac's groundedness, his integrity and values – such as his tender regard for family and all those under his care, his unwillingness to sacrifice anyone else's life for the sake of some absolute expectation, and his deeply rooted commitment to a life in one place – come from his terror-filled experience on Mt. Moriah.

In his book *The Messengers of God* Holocaust survivor and writer Elie Wiesel wrote: "The question is no longer whether Isaac was saved, but whether the miracle could happen again. And how often. And for what. And at what cost?" (p.88) Maybe the way to face the hard questions of a hard story is to keep saying in response to what we think is God's call – "Here I am ... Here I am ... Here I am" and be open to what more there is to know. God is still speaking ... Amen.

Sources used in this sermon:

Artson, Bradley Shavit, *The Bedside Torah*, 2001.
Plaut, et.al. *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*. 1981.

