

Genesis 22:1-14
Psalm 13
Romans 6:12-23
MATTHEW 10:40-42

WHAT WAS ABRAHAM THINKING?

Abraham is viewed as the exemplar of the person of faith by Jews, Christians and Muslims alike. He was the first to listen to and obey the one true God, who spoke to him and lead him out of his homeland into what is now known as The Holy Land. God promised to give this land to Abraham's descendents, who were to become "as numerous as the stars of heaven."

I can tell you from personal experience that you can see a *whole* lot more stars from the deserts of the Middle East than we can on even a clear night in Central New Jersey. Fourteen years ago, when the group I was a part of camped in the Sinai desert, I saw more stars than any other night before or since. It was an impressive promise for God to make to Abraham – and one Abraham would be reminded of every night through the long years of waiting which tested his faith.

At last Ishmael, Abraham's first-born son by his Egyptian maid Hagar, was born. He is hailed by Muslims as the ancestor of the Arabs and the fact that he was the first born is significant in traditional cultures. Since the eleventh century, Muslims have identified Ishmael as the one Abraham was willing to sacrifice, according to Bruce Feiler in his marvelous book Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths, in which he quotes many varied Jews, Christians and Muslims for their understanding of Abraham.

Christians and Jews see Isaac as the son who Abraham was willing to sacrifice, the son who the Bible identified as the heir to the promise. Abraham, then, understands that God is asking him to destroy the very heir who will be the fulfillment of God's promise. If he obeys, he voids God's promise at God's command; if he refuses, he disobeys God for the first time.

Let's go back to the fearsome pagan gods in which people believed in Abraham's time, as I referred to in previous sermons on Genesis. Many cultures did believe in divinities which they thought wanted them to sacrifice children – and not just in the Middle East 4,000 years ago. Child sacrifice to pagan mountain deities was part of Inca worship in South America just 600 years ago. Child sacrifice was only abolished in Ireland in the 5th Century A.D. thanks to St. Patrick, as part of his successful efforts to convert the Irish to Christianity. And child sacrifice is lifted up in the rest of the Bible – *after* this story – as the ultimate abomination, the sin of all sins. But this story itself is never referred to in the whole rest of the Hebrew Scriptures.

The passage is listed among the options for us in the Episcopal Church to read on Good Friday. The meaning is clear: while Abraham only had to go to the brink of offering his son, the Son of God went through with his own willing self-sacrifice to atone for the sins of the world. God, then, did experience the death of his son for religious reasons – something God categorically could *not* ask humans beings to do as worship.

We know the latter because of how this story turns out: Isaac lives. A sheep is substituted. Never again would a human being be put to such a test of faith.

Or – was Abraham testing *God*?

If Abraham goes through with this, by following God's command he has forced God to break God's promise to give him descendants and a homeland through Isaac.

Maybe, Abraham was not surprised to hear this command, since the gods he has grown up worshipping in Mesopotamia might well have commanded him to do such a thing. *Maybe* Abraham was thinking "So this God really *is* like all the other gods after all."

Or, maybe Abraham had the mind and heart of a fanatic – like too many of his descendants among all three faiths have been over the centuries – and was truly willing to slaughter his son if he believed God commanded it. If he was willing to slaughter his own son, how much easier would it have been to kill someone else's and claim a higher religious purpose for the deed? Read the stories of the Christian Crusades as well as contemplate the endless tit-for-tat of mutual lethal retaliations between Arabs and Jews today.

This story gets more difficult also if we think about Isaac. Isaac is not an infant at the time of this story; he is carrying the wood and conversing with his father, and he notices that they are not bringing with them any animal for the sacrifice. Post-biblical Jewish traditions see Isaac as a willing participant in submission to the will of God – and sometimes as an adult.

John the Baptist identifies Jesus as "the Lamb of John" – the substitute for temple offerings for sin, with a clear reference also to this story. Two early Christian leaders and writers, Irenaus and Tertullian, note that Isaac carried the wood for his own sacrifice just as Christ carried his own wooden cross – and as we Christians are asked to carry our crosses.

The biblical narrative itself is silent on the inner thoughts and feelings of Abraham and Isaac, deeply frustrating any modern reader who is used to novels which explore the unspoken concerns of characters at length. Even more dramatic a silence is the complete absence from this story of Sarah, Isaac's mother, who up to now has played a very prominent part (for a woman of 4,000 years ago whose story was passed on and written down by men) in these sagas. Sarah is Isaac's advocate and protector – except when he is in mortal danger. What's up with *that*?

This brief, heart-wrenching, laconic story raises many issues and thoughts – and I commend Bruce Feiler's book to you. The word "Islam" itself means submission, and Muslims lift up Abraham as "the true believer, the one who submits to God's will." Medieval Jews, Feiler writes, "began to see suffering as a sign of God's favor rather than his fury, seeing themselves – so often the victims of massacres – as Isaac, forever under the knife." Nobel Prize winner Elie Wiesel, however, "also emphasizes: martyrdom, for all its endurance in religious history, is not the theme of the Jews, or the theme of the binding [of Isaac]. Survival is. Isaac...ultimately lives."

Elda and I spent the week of our vacation in southwestern Utah, including Zion National Park. "Zion" is the biblical name for Jerusalem, and indeed the area does

remind me of the lands of the Bible, especially the mountainous desert of Mt. Sinai and the wilderness of Judah half-hiding the occasional dazzling green of stream beds or oases.

For all the beauty, 102 degrees and 13% humidity – what we experienced – is enough to remind oneself that the territory is potentially dangerous, that life and death can be a matter of water or no water, shade or no shade, and the creations of God – including mountains named for the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – dwarf the modest dwellings of human beings. In such a land, as in the original land of the patriarchs, matters of life and death and the will of God could come to peoples' minds and actions as primal forces unfiltered by interpreters and uncluttered by civilization's distractions.

What would each of us be willing to do if we really believed God was calling us - commanding us – to do it?

For many people in the world, the answer is “very little,” for others, the answer may be “too much.” Where is the right balance of faith without fanaticism, commitment without craziness?

Abraham's whole story tells us that without commitment there is no future, but that the future is also endangered by craziness. Where is the way of life then, where is the middle way?

LISTEN. That is what we must do, as Abraham did. Listen for God's call to us, God's call to commitment, God's call to faith as issued again and again over Abraham's very life and over our lives however long. And then KEEP LISTENING, especially if something seems crazy or paradoxical.

Abraham kept listening to God. So should we.

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