



SUNDAY SERMON

Offense and Sacrifice: Rereading the Story of Abraham and Isaac

DATE
Pentecost 4
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PREACHER
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What did we just read? I can only imagine many of you sitting around a kitchen table or comfortably on a couch hearing the heavenly notes from Bach, then Amy calling us to worship and grounding us in prayer, Carolyn gracefully articulating Take my heart ... and then, and then hearing David with conviction and sincerity reading the story about God commanding Abraham to murder his son. What. the. Heck. What is this doing in our service?

The Hebrew Bible gives us so many different pictures of what God is like. Earlier in Genesis God is a gardener. Walking in a newly born creation, planting new species and rendering humanity itself from the Earth to share in God's divine friendship. Later in Genesis, Abraham's grandson, Jacob, will wrestle with God face to face, boldly demand a blessing, and receive a new name: Israel, a person—a people who struggle with God. In Exodus we see Moses refuse God. Refuse to go along with God's plan of destruction and wrath. God listens and Moses skillfully negotiates a response of mercy. Exodus tells us explicitly that Moses changes God.

This morning's image of God does not easily translate to God the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. The ground of all our being, the Divine wisdom who pulls us further into herself, into a peace that knows only forgiveness and love.

No, this God tests Abraham, an implicit acknowledgement that God's own knowledge is lacking. And the nature of the test itself is unnerving and manipulative. It pairs divine violence on the one hand with the abject innocence of a child on the other. In this image of God, God's nature feels insecure and untrustworthy.

But is it?

I think there are plenty of good criticisms of religious belief. One that has never held much water for me is Marx's claim that religion is the opiate of the masses. That religious belief turns people into simplistic fools. I love our sacred texts. I love that they tell uncomfortable stories. The Hebrew Bible is a window into an ancient culture, some of the very first attempts by people to make sense of their world and to tell their stories about God. There is nothing sentimental in these stories. They are raw and often morally ambiguous.

And we should be careful not to dismiss them. Careful not to think of ourselves as more sophisticated and enlightened. What makes these stories so powerful is our ability to see ourselves in them.

continued

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The story of Abraham and Isaac is a sparse and powerful narrative. We hear nothing of Abraham, Sarah, or Isaac's inner dialogue. The journey to the mountain was a full three days. An unrelenting tension builds as Abraham and Isaac ascend. Treating this as a real story cannot but elicit a powerful and disturbing personal response.

Abraham seems resigned to carry through with it, but the sacrifice that God tests of Abraham could not be greater. There is no greater loss than the loss of a child. And here this loss is amplified by Isaac's significance. God has promised to Abraham and Sarah that from Isaac a great nation will spring forth. The death of Isaac amounts to nothing more than the loss of Abraham's future, his relationship with Sarah, and ultimately his relationship with God.

In many ancient myths of child sacrifice and even in modern myths like Stannis Barathanian's sacrifice of Shireen (in Game of Thrones), the sacrifice is tragic but ultimately believed to gain them or their kingdom something greater. The same is not true of Abraham. The narrative deprives us of anything to help understand why Abraham would commit to this other than being asked to do it by God.

The 19th century theologian and philosopher Soren Kierkegaard raised deep objections to how his culture understood its Christian faith. During that time in Denmark one was born Christian, if you were a citizen of Denmark you were by definition also a Christian. This version of Christianity emphasized that faith meant never to challenge or offend but rather only reinforce the values of the rich and powerful. Though it wore the outer garments of faith, Kierkegaard thought it spiritually bankrupt.

Jesus is an offense. He was slandered as a "glutton and drunkard" because he sought out the fellowship of social outcasts. He challenged a tribal religious culture that hung shame around the necks of the poor and the sick. Such an offense was Jesus the religious and political establishment executed him, hoping to forever silence Jesus' divine rebellion of grace.

How could the people of Denmark understand the power of faith if they believed they could have it without risking anything? This is, in part, what attracted Kierkegaard to the story of Abraham and Isaac. One could not risk more than what Abraham risked.

For me there's no getting around how uncomfortable the details are of what Abraham was willing to risk. What if we transpose the story into our own time. A story of sacrifice, of risk, a willingness to be misunderstood and ridiculed? What would that image of faith look like?

Might it look something like this?

This is Elizabeth Eckford as she tried to enter Little Rock high school in 1957. She was 15 years old at the time. She was a part of a group that would eventually become known as the Little Rock 9. The night before this picture was taken the eight other African American students and their families decided to change their meeting location so they could enter the school together. But Elizabeth's family didn't have a phone and she never received the message. This is her account of what happened the day that picture was taken:

I stood looking at the school— it looked so big! Just then the guards let some white students through. The crowd was quiet. I guess they were waiting to see what was going to happen. When I was able to steady my knees, I walked up to the guard who had let the white students in. He didn't move. When I tried to squeeze past him, he raised his

bayonet, and then the other guards moved in and they raised their bayonets. They glared at me with a mean look and I was very frightened and didn't know what to do. I turned around and the crowd came toward me. They moved closer and closer. Somebody started yelling, "Drag her over this tree!"

Elizabeth ran for her life. But she did not give up. There was an inner strength that grounded her, that propelled her in her pursuit of justice, of equal, fair treatment under the law. Nearly three weeks later after Eisenhower federalized the same troops that blocked her from entering before, the Little Rock 9 gained access to the school under heavily armed guard. But that did not stop those 9 children from being attacked by other students. Elizabeth was thrown down a flight of stairs and suffered untold number of dehumanizing insults. But still she would not leave and would not respond to their violence with violence of her own.

Faith is a complex thing. In the Bible we see so many different images of God. The Good Shepherd comforting and protecting the sheep, Jesus himself as a stranger, naked and hungry. But we also see Jesus as a man of uncompromising conviction. We must never forget that Jesus is an offense. The love of God shall not be separated from the people of God. Those we have cast out, God will not abandon. By God there will be justice. Nothing more than the legitimacy of our Christian fellowship and worship depends upon turning those convictions into a lived reality.

My brothers and sisters in Christ. Our faith calls us to great risk. Let us follow in the footsteps of our fathers and mothers of faith. Of Sarah and Abraham, of Rebekah and Jacob, of Mary and John, of Elizabeth and Martin. The road ahead of us is not easy. And it will require great sacrifice. As St. Francis prayed, May we not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.