

“Sacrifice and Life”

Rev. Debra Given, the Presbyterian Church in Leonia

June 29, 2014 Ordinary 13A

Genesis 22:1-14

Matthew 10:34-42

The story Susan read today of Abraham preparing his son Isaac to be a burnt offering to God is one of *the most* troubling stories in the Bible. And it's probably not the best choice for a Sunday when we are baptizing a baby. But it's one of the appointed texts for today, and I love a challenge. So here goes!

We start with the obvious question: How could God ask Abraham to do such a thing, something to us no moral person would ever consider? And how could Abraham, whom we call “the Father of our faith,” possibly agree? It's not as though Abraham always agreed with God. Earlier Abraham had argued with God over destroying the city of Sodom. Why didn't he argue this time? Why didn't he beg for Isaac's life? Where was his sense of fatherhood?

But we have to understand that this is an ancient story. And in those days people did practice child sacrifice. In some ways it was similar to magic or divination. For example, sometimes people would bury a child under the foundation of a building to bring good luck. I Kings mentions that a worker for king Ahab laid the foundation of Jericho “at the cost of his first born son,” and “the gates at the cost of his youngest son.” (16:34). That's hard for us to imagine today. But they believed that God controlled everything that might possibly happen, from weather to war to household well-being. Therefore they would do all they could to get God's favor. And this was probably the most extreme thing they could think of, to sacrifice to the gods something so precious.

Child sacrifice was also used as psychological warfare. 2 Kings (3:26-27) tells the story of a Moabite king who was fighting against the Israelites. It says that “when he saw that the battle was going against him, he took... his firstborn son who was to succeed him, and offered him as a burnt offering on the wall.” The Israelites saw what he did and were so shaken up and afraid of what the enemy's god might do in response, that they gave up the victory and retreated.

If child sacrifice was the ultimate sign of devotion to your god, how should Abraham show his devotion? Remember, Abraham was the first person to enter into a covenant relationship with the Hebrew God. God began the relationship by calling Abraham to leave his home and travel to a new land. And this was completely new. Abraham had no scriptures to read, no laws to follow, no role models of faith. His ancestors were in another land, and none of the people in this new land were following the same God. Yet *these people* showed their ultimate devotion with child sacrifice.

Today we know that this was a test, that God did not intend for Abraham to actually slaughter his son. And later in the Bible there are laws that speak clearly against child sacrifice. That kind of violence against children does not evoke God's favor under any circumstances. It is not the kind of loyalty that God desires.

There is an evolution of our understanding of God in the Bible, as well as an evolution of ethics, from the most primitive early writings to the New Testament. And this story could well be the beginning of a message against child sacrifice. But why didn't God just have a little talk with Abraham? Why make Abraham (and Isaac!) go through such an ordeal? How do you think Isaac felt at the end of this story?

I read several commentaries on this story last week and was amazed by the wide variety of thoughts. One person wrote that this story is far too terrible to even mention in church, and that we have to speak of the demands of faith without telling stories of abuse and murder.* But the story of Abraham and Isaac is well-known, even outside of our tradition, so we will have to come to terms with it somehow. And what better place to do it than in church?

Someone else** gave the story a more positive spin, kind of. He wrote that yes, it's a terrible story, but God's command to Abraham was still "holy, just and pure," because God would never ask Abraham to do something that God himself wouldn't do. This writer believes the whole story of Abraham and Isaac lays the groundwork for God to sacrifice his only son, Jesus Christ. Just as Isaac carried the wood himself, so Jesus carried the cross. Isaac traveled three days with his father, just as Jesus was in the tomb three days. And just as an animal died instead of a human being, Isaac, so Jesus died instead of us, to pay the price for our sins. That interpretation is a stretch in my view. It's twisting the meaning of an ancient story to serve the writer's theory of the cross. We need to read the story on its own terms and then figure out what the message is for us today.

The story of Abraham and Isaac is not written to be a study of God's character or morality. It's about Abraham, and Abraham's relationship to God and faith. This was a test of Abraham, as it says right at the start of the story, "After these things God tested Abraham." According to the story, God did not know how Abraham would respond. So it was a true test, and God had as much to lose as Abraham did.

The chapter before this tells of Isaac's birth, the miracle child of God's promise to Abraham and Sarah. Then Abraham made a covenant with the king of the Philistines and settled in their land. From there it should be smooth sailing, right? But then God decided to test Abraham, and shake up his world again. What was Abraham to do? Hold on to what he knew, what he had, what he could see and feel right there? Or set out yet again to a place in the distance that God would show him, and sacrifice what he understood God had promised and given to him?

The story is really about Abraham's response. It doesn't seem he was eager to do what he thought God required. When God called his name, he said, "Here I Am." But he never actually agreed verbally to make the sacrifice. Instead he got up early the next morning. He saddled his donkey. He gathered his helpers. He cut the wood. He set out and traveled for three days. He looked up and saw the place from a distance. It's almost as if he was moving in slow motion, giving himself time to let this sink in, or giving God a chance to stop him. But he trusted God enough to keep going on this uncertain and crazy journey. He trusted God enough to give up what he believed God had promised him and give his child to God. And he trusted that God would provide what was needed. And God did provide. There was no need to kill his only child, only to trust God to carry out the promise in God's own way.

OK, so what does all this have to do with baptism? You can be sure, Angie and Eric, that God will not ask you to sacrifice your baby. But when you baptize a child, in a way you give them up. You affirm that the child belongs just as much to God as to you. God has trusted this child to you for a while, and you are to guide her. But you cannot live out your own hopes and dreams through her. We parents have our own uncertain and crazy journey to travel. Our children may be with us, but they have their own thoughts and their own faith and their own dreams to follow. They belong to God, and at some point we have to step aside and trust them to God.

It's funny how we can be horrified by this story, yet people still sacrifice children out of supposed devotion to God. Think of Christian parents who disown their gay children. But is that really a sacrifice of devotion, or just clinging to rigid beliefs about what is good and acceptable? When a parent gives a child to God, they free the child to be the person God created them to be. And that may mean sacrificing their own pride and their own dreams for their child.

Lisa read Jesus' words from Matthew this morning, "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me... Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

We should never stop loving our children. But we are called to love God even more, more than anything we can dream of or hold on to. What do you hope for in life? Everything we desire in this life will pass away. But God is still there in the end. And God provides what we truly need, if we let go of our lives and follow where God leads.

May we have the courage and faith to loosen our grip on the things we so dearly cherish, be they children, houses, jobs or dreams, and go to those places that God will show us, trusting our future to God, in Jesus' name. Amen.

* Holbert, John C. "A Nasty Little Bit of a Tale: Reflections on Genesis 22:1-14," at <http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/Nasty-Little-Tale-John-Holbert-06-23-2014.html>.

** Deffinbaugh, Bob, "Final Exams (Genesis 22:1-24)" at the Biblical Studies Foundation, <https://bible.org>.