

“Questions for God”
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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Before this sermon begins, I want to give a disclaimer. You may find that I am throwing a lot at you in this sermon. It is a big, unwieldy sermon, thanks to a big, unwieldy text. Not only that; I wrote it last night after a drive from North Carolina, a drive that was advertised as 10 hours but which actually took 13 hours. The conference I was coming from was also big and unwieldy, a firehose of ideas and inspiration coming at me and I am not sure yet what to do with them. I will try to offer moments of wisdom and wonder to bring to the text, but if I fail to do that, if this sermon feels like too much for you, I invite you to come up to the communion table after worship, and pour yourself a cup of cool water after I am done. And let *that* be your sermon. I promise, I won't be offended. Now, let's begin.

Is there such thing as an unpreachable text?

This was a question we grappled with in a preaching seminar I took last week at the Montreat Worship and Music conference. I'm usually a talker, but I stayed silent and listened to various preachers and expert pew listeners. Their ideas ran the gamut; for those who avoid troubling passages, here's what they said: “The lectionary presents 4-6 passages as options each Sunday: go for the least offensive passage!” “It's not fair to put God in the position of being represented by a text that was written by humans and probably not true to what God really said or did.” “It's not fair to people in the pews— you may traumatize them and trouble their faith in ways you can't heal within the 10-15 minutes of a sermon.”

They make compelling arguments.

As for those who said they would *go there* with a troubling text, they said, “It's our holy scripture. We have to teach the people in the pews the tools to grapple with difficult texts.” In other words, “you can't edit God.” “Sometimes it's the scriptures that trouble you the most that can lead you to the precipice of deep meaning in your life.” “Our lives have troubling and violent stories in them. If we are going to bring our most troubling stories, honestly, before God, then we need to see we aren't the first people to go there.” Hmm... these are compelling arguments, too.

I reached for the gospel passage for the children's sermon, giving them a glass of water rather than an altar of sacrifice. I learned the story of the binding of Isaac as a little child— so little that it didn't even occur to me that it was troubling. It wasn't until I became a teenager that the horror of that moment hit me like rolling thunder. Maybe it's because that's the time I was testing out my own level of trust with each of my parents; I needed to know that I could test them, but that their care and commitment to me would be solid. I longed for them to choose me, even though my eye-rolling and petulant sighs probably showed them otherwise. The idea that

Abraham would choose God over his son didn't seem like a happy ending to me— even if God did supply a last-minute ram, just before Abraham's knife cut his son's throat.

Even today, this scripture passage brings up questions for me I would like to ask God: First, I want to ask God if that's really what God asked of Abraham, or if the biblical writers got it wrong. Or did Abraham get caught up in some intense religious zeal that didn't actually come from you, God?

Why would you give Abraham and Sarah a promise of a nation, and then ask Abraham to give it up? Even if this act did not result in murder, it seems like emotional abuse, to both Abraham and Isaac. What did this do to Isaac's sense of trauma and trust in relation to his father and the god he worshiped?

I want to ask you, God, What *do* you want out of our love for you? What does faithful obedience look like? Is this what love looks like?

There is something about Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac that shows a devotion to God that is not simply self-serving. It's one thing to love and follow God when God gives us nice things: like a child, a nation, a land... But how many of us would still follow God if our faith didn't give us rewards? What if what we valued was taken away because of our faith? How many of us would still follow Jesus if it led us to *dangerous* places? Sometimes our love in the earthly realm leads us to dangerous places: a protest line where our advocacy for the oppressed pits us against the powers that be; a hospital room as we watch a beloved one slip away; the risky vulnerability of choosing forgiveness. Isn't it easier just to walk away?

I want to ask God, have you ever considered just walking away from us?

Clearly this story is foundational— not only to Jews and Christians, but to Muslims too. Last week, our Muslim siblings in faith celebrated Eid al-Adha, Islam's second most important feast day, which honors Ibrahim's willingness to sacrifice his son— but in the Koran, it is his son Ismail who is put on the altar, not Isaac. Apparently Abraham heading up the mountain to sacrifice his son is the model for how the people Israel would ascend the mountain to the Jerusalem Temple.

This passage brought up so many questions for me about God that it got me wondering what questions you would have for God. Thanks to all who submitted questions last week- we got seven.

One question that was collected from last week's worshipers, "Am I truly following Jesus?"-- or expressed another way, "How do I know the path I take in this world is the correct one?" is like the first one I asked about Abraham— did God really speak to Abraham, or was it something he came up with on his own in his religious zeal? There's an article in the current issue of The Atlantic about a woman who bought an entire mountain in Pennsylvania, because she heard the

voice of God telling her to do so. How *can* we know when God is calling us to do something? How can we know if we are truly following Jesus?

I got three questions that I will frame around the “Where are you, God?” Two people asked about prayer– “where are you, God, when I pray?” and “How can I know, God, that you hear my prayer?” Another person asked, “When I die, will you meet me, God?” I imagine many join these questioners in wondering if there is a space in this world, wondering if there is a space in the world to come, where we can connect with God. Will God hear us? Will God talk back to us? Will we know what it is like to be in the presence of God?

We wonder these things, but what if God shows up for us so closely that God actually asks us to do things we don’t want to do? I don’t know if any of us want God to be close enough to be asking us to sacrifice anything we love so dearly as we can imagine Abraham loved Isaac.

The last two questions are pretty different from each other, so they get their own categories: “How does God overcome disappointment in us, God’s people?” I feel compassion for whoever wrote this, and wonder if it’s a personal sin or societal sin that makes them wonder this. I take comfort in knowing that none of us would be the first to disappoint God. Even Abraham did some disappointing stuff, including forcing a woman into sexual slavery to have his child, and then sending her into the wilderness to die. Pastor Debra gave a great sermon last week addressing this text. I may not have the faith of Abraham. I love God, and I am happy to share my child as a liturgist or to play the violin in church, but there’s no way I would put her on the sacrificial altar. But hopefully I would never do something so egregious as putting someone into sexual slavery or banishing them into the wilderness. I know Abraham and Sarah are remembered as our ancestors in the faith. Last week I saw a t-shirt that said “My most important job is to be a good ancestor.” Whether or not we have children, we are shaping the world that will be left to generations following us. Taking away affirmative action from colleges and universities will shape the rights and opportunities of generations following ours. I suspect this is disappointing to God. And we are on a rapid course to destroying the creation that God made with such loving care. I have to believe this disappoints God. So what will God do with that disappointment?

The last question I have from you is this: Why do some people suffer and others not? Where is the justice in that? Whoa. I’m not going to even try to address this one in the last minutes of a sermon. It’s like in counseling, when in the last 5 minutes of the session the client drops a bombshell on their therapist. Let’s save that for another session... But I will say that the experience of **almost** losing Isaac has a bit of symmetry to what Hagar experienced in a previous passage, where she– with her son Ishmael– were banished to the wilderness and Hagar as a mother had to gaze upon her only child, dehydrated in the barren desert, as death approached him. At the point where she could no longer watch, God provided a spring of water and preserved their lives and promised them a nation. Is there some sense of biblical justice that Abraham should experience the near-death of the son he *chose* to parent and preserve, when he abandoned his firstborn to the wilderness where he could die?

I can't answer these questions in the context of one sermon. I may not have satisfying answers to any of them at all. But I will try to take time to give air to all these questions through the summer in sermons I will share with you. Even if I can't provide a satisfying way to think about these questions, I may simply wonder together with you.

As far as whether God's call to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, and Abraham's willingness to go through with it:

Larissa Kwong Abazia was our conference preacher for my week at Montreat and also led the preaching seminar I took. You may remember her; she preached at our church last summer while I was on vacation. Larissa shared a story of a time when she was new to a church she was serving and had just given the sermon. After worship, she stood in the narthex to the sanctuary, greeting people as they walked out. Her son, who was 4 at the time, was also in the narthex. Was he standing beside his mom, meeting the people new to the flock? No. Was he greeting the other children he would come to know at their new church? No. Was he sitting quietly in an old cushioned chair, waiting until his mother was done? No. What her son was doing was rolling around the floor of the narthex, back and forth, around and around, body flailing about, completely oblivious to the mom-stare thrown at him like a dart.

As a preacher and a parent, I could understand her plight. Should she pause her greeting to redirect her son? Should she apologize to the parishioners she was greeting? Should she at least explain why her son needed to do that?

She didn't do any of these things, because one of the parishioners greeting her at the door said, "I am so happy your son is here, and I look forward to getting to know him." It was said without shame or irony, just kindness and care— a cup of cool water to a thirsty child. At that point Larissa realized that she could trust this congregation— or at least, this parishioner— to see her son for what he needed in that moment, and to let him be himself.

When Larissa shared this story, it was in the context of welcome and inclusion. But I wonder if we can apply it to the scripture text, too. It seems like my task as a preacher is to make a scripture neat and tidy. Either hide away the messy bits, or wrestle them into a manageable form, or to remove them altogether. But maybe what scripture needs to do is to roll around the contours of our hearts and our minds, back and forth, flailing about. Letting it do that doesn't mean we have to go and do likewise— we don't need to put our own beloved ones on the altar before God because Abraham did, and we don't need to roll around the narthex on the floor either just because scripture is doing it.

But I believe that when we allow scripture to roll around in our minds, doing its own unwieldy thing, it will show up as useful, and even show up as loving, when we really do need it.