

Proper 8, Year A

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I never hear this lesson from Genesis without having a strong and mixed reaction to it. My first reaction is to become angry. How could God ask a person to sacrifice a child? I have a hard time stomaching that Biblical claim. This is where the biblical commentators help me. They remind me that Abraham, as father of faith, was leading the way out of earlier forms of religious ritual that did include ritual sacrifice of children to a new covenant with one God who would not ask for such a horrific thing to take place in his name. Read on this level I wonder if the voice of God calling Abraham to bring Isaac up the mountain became garbled in Abraham's mind with what had been required in the past in the worship of lesser Gods. And God, making use of this garbled understanding shows that now no such sacrifice is to be made.

All of that helps me, but I still can't shake the horror of the event. Back in the mid-1990's Bill Moyers hosted a distinguished group of scriptures scholars from the Christian, Jewish and Islamic traditions (all of which trace back to Abraham as Patriarch) and engaged them in conversations about the book of Genesis. It was a fascinating series to watch, and the transcripts were published into book form. I consulted that book this week and was struck by what several of those scholars had to say about this passage.

Norman Cohen a Jewish scholar had this to say:

The irony, of course, is that at the end of the story, when Abraham returns to Beersheba...Isaac is no longer there, and Abraham is walking together with the two servants. That's all he's left with at the end of the journey.

Burton Visotzky, also a Jewish scholar responded:

Not only does Isaac not come down the mountain with Abraham, but we're never shown another conversation between them. The next time you see them together, Isaac is burying his father- which, in some way, speaks of the horror the son has undergone at the hands of his father...

Cohen responded:

The Rabbis say that at the climax of this story, as Abraham raises the knife and is about to take his son's life, tears drip from his eyes into Isaac's eyes and Isaac's vision is impaired for the rest of his life. We know from the Jacob and Esau story that when Isaac is old, he has difficulty seeing. It's as if to say that the impact of the near-sacrifice on Isaac is so devastating that the way he sees the world is changed at that moment.

Then Seyyed Hossein Nasr, professor of Islamic studies entered the conversation adding:

The Qur'an does not mention the name of the son of Abraham offered for sacrifice, so early in Islamic history there was debate as to whether the son was Isaac or Ishmael. Later, Qur'anic commentators and religious authorities in general gravitated toward Ishmael. Putting that question aside though, we have to remember that Isaac and Ishmael were prophets, and as prophets they did not have our ordinary human consciousness. To read our own reactions into what Isaac or Ishmael experienced would be to misunderstand what the heart of the story is. Isaac's or Ishmael's surrender to the will of God is no less than that of Abraham. Islam sees Isaac and Ishmael as being mature enough to understand that they have been brought into this world in a special manner to fulfill God's purpose. So, whichever son it was, he was willing to give himself in sacrifice.

I offer you this sampling of commentary on this text because I think it shows how complex and many layered the story is. Because of the gut wrenching context, there is not now, nor has there ever been, one agreed on take on it by those who hold it at sacred text.

When I began this sermon I said I never read this text without having a strong mixed reaction to it. So, I've shared about the anger reaction that rises in me. Now I want to talk about the positive reaction I have.

Once I have dealt with the horror of this text, it has the power to fill me with relief, and confidence. As I look at Abraham in this story, I see a person who had staked his life on the promises of God. He left family and home behind to follow where God would lead. He

received a blessed covenant with God and dared to believe that God would bring forth many descendents from him, even as he and Sarah remained childless into old age. He did try to take matters into his own hands a good number of times. For instance his son Ishmael was born to him by Sarah's handmaid, because Abraham and Sarah could not see how the promise of descendants could be fulfilled any other way. But then God surprised them with prophesy of another son in their twilight years and Abraham dared to believe that prophesy, even as Sarah laughed.

The original promise of progeny came to pass and then Abraham hears a call to let the best evidence of the promise – his son, Isaac – go. And Abraham is prepared to do so. That is the awe inspiring part to me. That is radical faith.

I don't know about you, but everything I ever let go of that really mattered to me had claw marks on it from me struggling so hard to hold on. Abraham helps me in those moments. Letting go of the promise does not mean the end of it, he seems to be telling me.

In the Bill Moyer's conversation on this, Christian Biblical scholar, Phyllis Trible, said:

"It's not a good idea to make this into an ethical story – a "should" story. But it is very much alive as a descriptive story. This is the human predicament, and this is how God is perceived. There is a terror in God's mysteriousness and inscrutability...It has always tantalized people that Isaac does not return with Abraham. The fact that Abraham returns alone has led to all kinds of rabbinic interpretations of what happened to Isaac. Was he, in fact, sacrificed? I think the absence of Isaac at the end is a way of saying that if Abraham is willing to sacrifice the child, that does not give Abraham a license to reattach himself to that child. Later he establishes a new relationship to that child, treating him as an adult and finding the right wife for him."

One message I take from this story is that when I let go to God, people, situations, chapters of life, old understandings that just don't fit any longer, I can be assured that I let go into good hands. Hands that take what I have let go, bless what I have let go, break open what I have let go, and then share what I have let go with me again

in surprisingly new and grace filled forms. I trust this, because I see it in action at the Eucharistic table. I trust this because I see it in action among us every day. This does not rescue any of us from horror, trauma or terror – our own lives and the life of our world often seem to be brim with such things. Letting go to God in moments of terror, trauma and horror, opens a path for us to flow through those moments by trusting that there is another side to reach, beyond them. Another side, where God is already at work to bring wholeness and healing. Letting go is not about blind faith. It is about trusting that God can see past things that we cannot. May we know that kind of insightful faith in our letting go. In Christ's name. Amen+

Qoutations taken from Genesis: A Living Conversation, Doubleday, 1996

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