

Genesis 22:1-14 (NRSV)

The Command to Sacrifice Isaac

(Heb 11.17–19)

22 After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.”² He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.”³ So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him.⁴ On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away.⁵ Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.”⁶ Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together.⁷ Isaac said to his father Abraham, “Father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?”⁸ Abraham said, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So the two of them walked on together.

⁹ When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.¹⁰ Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.”¹² He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.”¹³ And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.¹⁴ So Abraham called that place “The LORD will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.”

Hearing the True God

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Text: *Genesis 22:1-14*

This morning we approach a text that seems as far removed from us as any that is possible, the famous story of the near sacrifice of Isaac. To all of us, I think I can safely say, the idea of ritually sacrificing one's child is repulsive. We cannot imagine it. It cuts against every fiber of our deepest sensibilities. In a real sense, we simply cannot get our minds around the idea that Abraham would consider willingly binding his child to a pile of wood, cutting his throat and setting the whole thing on fire.

But the fact is, in the Ancient Near East, just such a scenario made perfect sense. Paul Nuechterlein says, "We need to remind ourselves that our horrified shock at thinking about ritually killing a child was no shock at all in Abraham's world."¹ In Abraham's world it was perfectly imaginable that God would require just such a sacrifice, and that in response God would bestow his blessing. Such was the ancient cultural milieu.

As far removed from us as this story is, however, it remains one of the most important stories in the Bible for us today. The story remains important for us because on the one hand ancient Israel moved away from ritual child sacrifice, and this story helps us glimpse that transition. On the other hand, it remains important because Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac is very often, even today, compared to God's willingness to sacrifice Jesus. As Abraham was faithful to God, so God was faithful to humankind. Parallel is the willingness of Abraham and God to sacrifice an only child in order to please God. We'll see that this continuing use of sacrificial ideology of the crucifixion spills into many other aspects of human interaction right up to this day.

But first, let's go back in time. Let's consider the transition away from human sacrifice in ancient Israel. There's a joke that goes something like this. Abraham was building a computer. His son Isaac was watching with interest. Isaac, it turns out, was a computer wiz, a geek, one might say. Isaac had severe doubts about his very old father's technological savvy. So, Isaac was watching with interest, one could even say with a certain dubiousness as Abraham began constructing a computer. Abraham was moving right along, though. He screwed the motherboard into the case. He attached the power supply. He attached the hard drive and the video card. He carefully mounted the CPU and the heatsink. He attached all the cables. Needless to say, Isaac was impressed. The old man was pretty good. Finally Abraham was ready to cover the case and call the job finished. But Isaac saw that one of the most important things of all was missing. Maybe Abraham didn't really get computers after all. Abraham had put no memory into the computer.

¹Paul John Nuechterlein, Girardian Lectionary Commentary
(www.girardianlectionary.net).

Isaac piped up, “Hey Pop, if you don’t put some memory in that thing, it’ll never work.”
“It’s fine,” responded Abraham.

“Look, Dad, I’m not pulling your leg here. You did a great job putting that thing together, but if you don’t put memory in, it won’t be able to execute any commands. It won’t run at all.”

Again Abraham shrugged off Isaac, “Don’t worry son. It’ll work just fine.”

Isaac was exasperated. “Dad, listen to me. I’m just trying to be helpful here. You’re making a big mistake if you don’t put some memory in that thing. See those slots right there. That’s where the memory is supposed to go.”

Abraham put his arm around his son’s shoulder and patted him condescendingly. “Son, Son, it’s alright. Everything will be okay. God will provide the RAM.”

Okay, I didn’t say it was a great joke. I just said it was a joke. But it does point us to a moment in the actual Biblical story that is full of meaning for us. In Abraham’s era ritual child sacrifice was not uncommon. It was still a plausible idea. But it’s also on the way out. Isaac, you will recall, looks around as they go up the mountain. “Where’s the lamb?” he asks. Where’s the lamb? Already ancient Israel had moved toward animal sacrifice and away from human sacrifice it would seem. In Isaac’s question we can hear both move away and perhaps his nervous worry that it was still around, that he might be the sacrificial animal. As Gil Bailie notes, “Israel’s renunciation of the practice of human sacrifice took place over a long period of time, during which intermittent reversions to it occurred.² This time betwixt and between was fraught and complicated. Did Isaac suspect that absent the lamb, he might be the sacrifice? Was his question posed in fear and suspicion? We have no way of getting into Isaac’s brain. We don’t know. But we do know this. Abraham was unsure of himself and didn’t tell the whole truth. He didn’t tell Isaac that he, Isaac, was the sacrifice. “God will provide the lamb,” he said. Hardly the statement of a man confident in his mission. Abraham was struggling.

The story of Abraham and Isaac is often told as a story of faith. Abraham demonstrates his faith by his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, the story goes. When Abraham passes the test, God says, “Just kidding, Abraham. But you passed the test of faith. Now, go get the ram in the bush over there. You don’t have to kill Isaac.”

But the story is more complicated and much richer than that. In Abraham’s era child sacrifice was still evident. In that culture it remained, perhaps, the greatest show of faith. But in fact, the origins of the practice had a lot more to do with human beings than with God. God never was in favor of sacrifice. Sacrifice was an ancient coping mechanism that human beings developed when societies and cultures were being formed. In fact, God enters the picture as a counter-voice, a voice against a primitive notion of God, a voice trying to convince people to stop sacrifice. God was trying to move the people away from their ideas of sacred violence, but the change was slow going and confusing for the people.

In this betwixt and between time, Abraham was confused. Which was the true voice of God? Sacrifice Abraham? Don’t sacrifice Abraham? Captured in this profound story we find Abraham ultimately emerging from the cloud of confusion and placing his faith in the voice of

²Quoted in: Paul John Nuechterlein, Girardian Lectionary Commentary
(www.girardianlectionary.net).

the real God. Here was the moment of truth. Abraham was prepared to go through with the sacrifice of Isaac. He had bound his son to the pyre. Abraham held the knife over his head. As Gil Bailie says in his book *Violence Unveiled*, at this moment Abraham showed his faith alright. “Abraham's faith consisted, not of almost doing what he didn't do, but of not doing what he almost did, and not doing it in fidelity to the God in whose name his contemporaries thought it should be done.”³ That is, Abraham’s faith was proven in hearing the true God and in the name of the true God refusing to do what others, and even he himself to some degree, thought God was asking of him. In this story God finally breaks through and says, apropos of the joke, not, “I will provide the RAM,” but in agreement with Abraham’s computer construction, “The RAM is not necessary. There may not be a more important moment in all the Bible.

It would be good if that were the end of the story. But it is not. Bailie says that Israel’s renunciation of child sacrifice took place over a long time and with quite a bit backsliding. I think it’s fair to say that it’s not gone yet, even at this moment.

Jesus died for our sins. It’s a main tenet of the Christian faith. And for many it means that God found human beings so sinful that he needed a sacrifice, a repayment of the debt we had incurred, because of our sinfulness. So bad were we and so much debt did we owe, the story goes, that God realized that all the sacrifice in the world would not cover it. But God really wanted the debt to be repaid. So, God sacrificed his only son, Jesus. Because Jesus was so good, sinless actually, his sacrifice would nicely cover the debt. Through Jesus’ death human reconciliation with God was purchased. It’s called substitutionary atonement. God substituted Jesus’ death for ours so that our debt could be paid.

I think you can see that the true God would find this idea horrifying. A much better understanding of the crucifixion, one much more consistent with the story itself, goes this way. Deluded humans crucified Jesus. They believed that they were faithful alright. They believed were faithfully serving God, or faithfully serving their loyalty to the Emperor, or faithfully serving their lust for power. That’s what the innocent Jesus came to save us from, if we want to use that language. He came to save us from ourselves, to show us the human capacity to slaughter the innocent victim in the name of God. He came to show us the false Gods we construct and follow and sacrifice for. He came to unmask our delusion.

The trouble is, our delusion remains. The trouble is, substitutionary atonement, sacrifice, is still a widely-held idea in Christian theology. You can still hear it said that we were bought by the blood of Jesus because God loved us so much. But God did not need a sacrifice, a paid debt. If anything, God loved us so much that God was willing to take on human form. God loved us so much that God was willing to suffer at our hands. God loved us so much that God was willing to innocently suffer to show us just how twisted our logic and faith had become. In that sense God was willing to suffer for us.

The trouble is we have not learned yet what he so plainly taught us. Our deluded thinking still permeates our religious and human ideologies. And we think we are faithful when we are deluded.

Nuechterlein says, “It takes some kind of faith in God to fly a plane full of people into a World Trade Center tower. It takes some kind of faith. The question for our time is, What kind?”

³Ibid

What kind of faith is it that causes a person to think that God would reward him for massacring thousands of innocent people?"⁴

It takes some kind of faith in God to think that a nation-state is sanctioned by God. It takes some kind of faith in God to sacrifice your young men and women at the altar of patriotism. It takes some kind of faith in God to know that your nation is blessed and righteous even when you learn that its justifications are filled deceit and half-truths. It takes some kind of faith in God to believe that the nation is so sacred that if you raise the slightest question about its actions you are a traitor. The question for our time is, What kind? What kind of faith in God? What kind of God will not let you use the word of God to judge whether the nation is actually following God?

Abraham. Four thousand years ago Abraham helped us answer the question. As Nuechterlein says of Abraham, "It takes some kind of faith in God to take your only son -- the heir that you thought you'd never get but finally received -- it takes some kind of faith in God to take that boy up onto a mountain, bind him on an altar, raise the knife in your hand, and be ready to plunge it into his heart as a sacrifice to God. Yes, it takes some kind of faith."⁵

O Yes, brothers and sisters, it takes some kind of faith. But it is not faith in the God of Abraham and Isaac. It is not faith in the God of Jesus. It is not faith in the God of love and mercy. The God who draws us to the altar of sacrifice time after time, who in age after age asks us to lift the knife over our heads, is the God of our own delusion. It is the God of the wily serpent. It is the God of the true God's executioner.

Reverberating across the centuries, though, comes the voice of the one true God. In every age there echoes the words of holy hope. In every age we can hear a version of, "Abraham. Abraham. Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him. Lower the blade and release the child, Abraham, and that will be the surest sign of your faith. Abraham listen to me." Amen.

⁴Ibid

⁵Ibid