

## “Father-Son Binding”

Gen. 22:1-14

June 29, 2008, Hope Church, Lynn Japinga

[Before OT Lesson: We have been reading about Abraham and Sarah and God’s promises to them, and how long they waited for the promised son. Last week they finally had the baby they wanted so badly, and they named him Isaac, which means laughter. But in the story we are about to read, nobody is laughing any more. This is one of those texts that should have a warning label on it: May not be suitable for children. For the children who listen to this, I want to assure you that there are many sermons where the preacher says, “do what the Bible says.” This is not one of them. Your parents will not do to you what the father does in this story. So with that in mind, listen for the word of God.]”

A couple of weeks ago I was at a worship service where the minister introduced the Scripture reading by saying it was from “the book that we love.” Hmm. There are many loveable things about the Bible, but this particular story is NOT one of them. When I read it last week I was so angry I could barely finish. This is one of the most horrifying stories in the Bible. It raises a lot of questions. Here are a few of mine.

What kind of God would ask someone to kill his own son? This God seems mean-spirited and cruel. Even if God was just testing Abraham’s faith and did not intend to have him kill Isaac ... the psychological damage on both father and son must have been extraordinary. Do we want any kind of relationship with a God who acts like this?

Why does Abraham simply go along with this preposterous idea? A few chapters earlier, when God announced plans to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham negotiated with God at great length. He told God that it was not fair to destroy an entire city if there are righteous people left in it. And God was willing to bargain, although in the end, there were not even ten righteous people there and God destroyed the city anyway.

But here Abraham is absolutely passive about the fate of his own son. Maybe he thought it was useless to argue. Maybe he thought he didn't deserve God's blessings anyway. Maybe he was just tired. It had been hard work trying to follow God.

And what about Isaac? Does he simply go along with this bizarre idea? At one point he asks his father where the lamb is, and Abraham says that God will provide it. But once they got to the mountain, it became clear that Isaac was the lamb! Did Isaac resist? Did he try to fight off his father? What would it have felt like to have your father tie you up? What did it feel like to have your father raise a knife and know that he was about to kill you? What does this do to the father-son relationship?

And where was Sarah in all of this? I'm guessing Abraham didn't consult her. Can you hear her response? "God told you to do WHAT? Are you out of your MIND? No way you are sacrificing our son."

Some of the ancient Jewish commentaries on this text say that when Sarah found out what had happened, she died from the shock. The idea that God might have commanded this and Abraham was willing to obey was enough to kill her.

This text is important to Jews, Christians, and Muslims, but it has always been a difficult text to interpret. What's the moral of the story? Are we supposed to sacrifice our children as a sign of our obedience to God? People occasionally do that now. They claim to hear the voice of God telling them to kill their children, but they are judged criminal or mentally ill or both. So the point of the story is NOT to go and do likewise.

Perhaps the point that we are supposed to love God more than our children. God wondered whether Abraham was more devoted to God or Isaac. Did Abraham love the giver or the gift? So God designed this brutal test to learn Abraham's true loyalties. And

Abraham passed the test with flying colors, apparently. He was so obedient to God that he was willing to kill his son. But if he passed the test of obedience, he failed the test of fatherhood! The text later says that only Abraham went back down the mountain. Isaac may have wanted nothing more to do with a father who was willing to kill him.

Perhaps this story is about faith. Abraham trusts God so much that he is willing to kill his son. Maybe God will provide another son. Maybe God will raise Isaac from the dead. And Abraham's faith is rewarded. There is the ram in the bushes. Abraham does not have to kill Isaac after all. Look how faithful and heroic Abraham is. Look how much he trusts in God.

I am a little dubious about some of these interpretations. One commentator wrote that when Isaac heard his father say that God would provide the lamb, Isaac fully trusted in both God and his father. Really? How does the commentator KNOW this? Isaac did not have much choice about it. Maybe Isaac spent the rest of the trip wondering why his father had gone crazy, and hating this God Abraham claimed to worship, and wondering how he could make a break for it!

One question to ask of the text is whether Abraham really heard the voice of God telling him to kill his son. This seems so inconsistent with the character of God, who later made it clear that child sacrifice was repulsive. But child sacrifice was fairly common in the surrounding areas and religions. Maybe Abraham saw other religious people who believed that the highest form of devotion was to offer their child as a sacrifice to their god. And maybe Abraham wondered if he should do that to. And maybe he kept wondering until his own voice seemed to be the voice of God. But he was wrong. And God intervened at the last minute and said NO. You do not sacrifice a child.

In the story as it's told, though, the struggle for Abraham was whether he could let go of Isaac. Abraham's entire future rested in this child. Abraham had given up his land and family behind in order to follow God, and now God seemed to be asking him to give up the future as well.

We are not faced with this decision exactly. But we all have times in our lives when we have to let go of things and people that are important to us. If we are parents, we have to learn over and over again to let go of our children. When they go to kindergarten. When they learn to drive. Especially when they go to college.

The summer before Mark left for college, he seemed to be doing everything he could to make it easier for us by being, well, difficult. So when the time finally came I thought I would be fine with transition. He was ready and eager. I would not be one of those clinging mothers who couldn't let go. But about three hours after we got to Iowa I was sick. It is not easy to let go.

And some of you have watched your children make some difficult choices, and you would like to break in and say, STOP THAT, and you can't.

And some of you have faced one of life's most difficult challenges ... you have watched your child die. And that tears you apart and you cannot see how you will ever be able to keep living yourself.

There are many different degrees of loss.

We get sick, and we have to let go of our self-image as a healthy person.

We leave one job and begin another.

We encounter violence and we have to let go of the idea that the world is always a kind, safe place.

We realize that we are not in control of our own lives, or the lives of our children.

Sometimes it seems that God is calling us to let go of one thing and move toward another, like Abraham. Sometimes letting go is just a natural part of life ... our children grow up, we get older, we retire. But letting go is always difficult because it's a loss. It is painful to lose relationships or confidence or health or productivity. So we often try to hold on tightly. Or we worry. Or we try to control everything.

And God says let go. It will be alright. Not because it's easy. It will still be painful. But at the most difficult places of our lives, when we have to let go of what we care about, or do something beyond our capacity, God is present.

Abraham learns that God provides. And the mountain is actually named God provides. But another way to translate that is that God sees. [last week, God hears.] But God sees the bigger picture.

Andrew Greeley books about Father John Blackwood Ryan, a Catholic priest. Cardinal Cronin is a dramatic figure. Tall, white haired, handsome, personable. But when there is a crisis in the diocese of Chicago, he calls on Blackie. "See to it, Blackwood."

God sees to it. God provides the ram. God tells Abraham NOT to sacrifice Isaac.

And part of our letting go is to learn to trust, in the god who never lets go.