

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
July 2, 2017
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Genesis 22:1-14
Psalm 13
Romans 6:12-23
Matthew 10:40-42

Fair to say, the stories we've heard these past two weeks from Genesis are deeply disturbing. Last week, we heard how Abraham cast out Hagar and Ishmael, the son that she bore him. He gave her a little bread and a skin of water, and then he sent the two of them off into the desert, alone and without any protector. This week, we hear the story of a time when Abraham was all-too-willing to slay (by his own hand) his other son, his favored son, the son he loved.

There is a whole category of passages/stories in the Bible that have been referred to as "texts of terror." One observer says that for most Episcopalians, "ignoring these texts [of terror] is something of a lifelong devotional practice."ⁱ

I understand the temptation. But they aren't going away. And in the meantime, they provide ample ammunition for those who dismiss those of us who profess religious faith. How could anyone, they ask, worship a God who is such a monster?

Well, there is another option. We don't have to ignore them. But neither do we have to fear them. We can take our cue from storytellers – the rabbis, for example, who freely and creatively and imaginatively and reverently play with the details of the old, old stories. There's a Yiddish folk tale, for example, that asks:

Why did God not send an angel to tell Abraham to sacrifice Isaac?

Because God knew that no angel would take on such a task. Instead, the angels said, "If you want to command death, do it yourself."ⁱⁱ

So I want to go back to the story and open it up again to see if there are surprises hidden there.

In the telling of this story, Abraham is called three times: once by God, next by Isaac, and last of all by an angel. They each call him by name: God and the angel calling him by his proper name, Abraham, which means "father of many"; and Isaac simply calling him "Father." They each call out to Father Abraham, and each time he responds, saying, "Here I am."

And then, each time, more is said between them – and it sounds like Abraham talks to all of them the same way, as if he speaks with God and angels as easily as he talks to his son.

And, I don't know, maybe that's how it really worked for him. But the thing is, that's not how it's ever worked for me. I can harken back to a moment in my life when I felt "called by God," a "calling" that led to my ordination and ultimately to my being here at Trinity. And I could add one or two other pivotal moments in my life when I felt myself addressed deeply by God and given direction for my life.

I might go so far as to say that God called me by name ... but not in so many words. Something happened, something real. But I had to make sense of it, put words to it, and fill in the blanks.

And that makes me wonder about this story. Maybe it describes something that happened to and within Abraham, a time he felt God's presence to be powerfully real in his life. It was real, almost a tangible thing. It was as if God called him by name. And maybe Abraham fell to his knees in the moment, and lost himself in awe and wonder, saying, in essence, "Here I am."

Maybe Abraham knelt there and remembered all that had happened over the past years – the past decades of his life – the many ways he had been blessed with so many opportunities and such a wonderful life, far surpassing anything he had once imagined. And he could only conclude that it was God who had blessed him, that all he had had been a gift.

And maybe, just then, a chilling realization came over Abraham. In a moment of brutal honesty, he had to admit he had always been selfish with respect to God, always looking for God to give and give and give ... and he, Abraham, had never really given anything in return.

And maybe Abraham, full of awe and wonder (mixed in with remorse and self-loathing), solemnly resolved to do something. And looking around, Abraham might have noticed how the locals proved their love for their gods. They held nothing back; they even sacrificed to their gods ... even their own children. And maybe he decided that his God deserved no less.

All of which is to allow that something happened, something real. But Abraham is the one who had to make sense of it all and fill in the blanks. And maybe he got it wrong. That is, in fact, what some medieval rabbis decided. They said that Abraham's imagination led him astray. One midrash says that God said, "I never considered telling Abraham to slaughter Isaac." ⁱⁱⁱ

Isaac was the next to call out to Abraham, calling him by the name he used: "Father!" And Abraham responds as before, "Here I am." This time, we'd probably guess, the voices would have been crystal clear; there'd be no need to fill in the blanks for the conversation that follows.

And yet there's so much that had been left unsaid before. It looks to me like Abraham never told anyone else what he had heard God say to him. I wonder if he got up early in the morning because he wanted to sneak out before Sarah might have caught wind of his intentions. He took two young men with him, but he clearly never filled them in on the plan. "Stay here," he says, "the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we'll come back to you."

Isaac asks about the lamb so conspicuously absent. And Abraham ... well, Abraham seems discomfited by the question; his answer is clearly evasive. And if there was anything else said between the two of them, we never hear of it. And yet it occurs to me that maybe this is when Abraham began to wonder if something is amiss, if he might have misunderstood what God had really said to him. After all, if he has to sneak out to do this thing, if he has to lie about it to his companions – and to his own son – maybe the thing itself is just wrong!

And then there's a third call. An angel calls, "Abraham! Abraham!" And once more he responds, saying simply, "Here I am." ... though, again, maybe not in so many words.

The angel calls out Abraham's name not just once, as before; this time the angel says his name twice – desperate to get his attention. I mentioned the Yiddish folk tale earlier. Maybe this is a point in favor of the truth of it, because if the angels would have refused to command death, they'd have jumped at a chance to offer a reprieve.

And I should allow that maybe the angel and Abraham spoke together just as it's recorded for us this morning. Or maybe, as before, Abraham was obliged to make sense of it, and fill in the blanks after the fact. Maybe no words were spoken at all. Maybe Abraham looks up from the sacrificial pyre in that moment and sees the ram and takes it as a message, a sign from God! No such things as coincidences, some people say, they're just God's way of acting anonymously.

For whatever it's worth – and it's worth a lot, it seems to me – what the story does tell us pretty explicitly is that Abraham knew the sense he made of it all. It was Abraham, after all was said and done (whatever it was that was really said – or left unsaid – or inferred after the fact) ... after all was said and done, "Abraham called that place 'The Lord will provide.'" That's what this all means, in the end. At least that's what it meant to Abraham in the end.

I don't know if that helps. I've tried to re-imagine the story with you here this morning in the hopes that it might help us neither ignore this text of terror nor shiver before a monstrous God.

There are still lessons for us to absorb. The first, lest we ever wonder, is that God doesn't command the sacrifice of children. I think the story makes the point on its own, but I could cite chapter and verse, from Leviticus and from Jeremiah and from Ezekiel, if I needed to. ^{iv}

The second lesson is for us to remain open, listening for the many ways God speaks to us. In my experience, God doesn't speak just once and is done; we need to listen for God who speaks in other voices – through family and friends, perhaps, or even a strange messenger.

And, of course, Abraham tells us what it all really means: God will provide. Too easily, intent upon the tasks we've set ourselves to, we miss seeing what is right before us, what gifts have been provided for us. We call this planet "earth," our "island home." Abraham renames it for us. We should call it, "The Lord will provide."

Note: In the early verses of this reading, Abraham was told to "go to the land of Moriah." The Inclusive Bible adds a translation of the place name: Moriah means "Seeing." So here at the end, Abraham has gone to the place of "Seeing" and there discovered that God provides.

ⁱ J. Barrington Bates @ <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/stw/2014/06/02/3-pentecost-proper-8-a-2014/> -- accessed June 29, 2017.

ⁱⁱ Kathryn Schifferdecker @ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3279 -- accessed June 29, 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Binding of Isaac" @ https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Binding_of_Isaac&oldid=787840420 -- accessed June 30, 2017.

^{iv} Kathryn Schifferdecker @ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3279 -- accessed June 29, 2017 -- includes this summary of the idea: "many argue that it is simply an etiological tale about the shift from human sacrifice to animal sacrifice." (I really wanted to include the quote.)

She goes on to cite these relevant passages:

You shall not give any of your offspring to sacrifice them to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD.

Leviticus 18:21

For the people of Judah have done evil in my sight, says the LORD; they have set their abominations in the house that is called by my name, defiling it. And they go on building the high place of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire—which I did not command, nor did it come into my mind. Therefore, the days are surely coming, says the LORD, when it will no more be called Topheth, or the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of Slaughter: for they will bury in Topheth until there is no more room. The corpses of this people will be food for the birds of the air, and for the animals of the earth; and no one will frighten them away. And I will bring to an end the sound of mirth and gladness, the voice of the bride and bridegroom in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem; for the land shall become a waste.

Jeremiah 7:30-34

When you offer your gifts and make your children pass through the fire, you defile yourselves with all your idols to this day. And shall I be consulted by you, O house of Israel? As I live, says the Lord GOD, I will not be consulted by you.

Ezekiel 20:31