

Abraham and Isaac

I'm offended. You should be offended, too. I'm offended by the reading from Genesis this morning. It has to be one of the hardest readings in the Bible. It goes against everything that I know about God or want to know about God. What does one do when a passage from the Bible is just plain offensive?

We could have had an alternative reading. The lectionary for the season of Pentecost in the summer actually has two tracks. Track 1, which we use, goes through entire books of the Bible sequentially. Right now we're going through Genesis. The alternative Track 2 is tied more to the Gospel for the day. This morning we could have had a reading from Jeremiah, which could have been just as bad. Jeremiah was not the happiest fellow.

Today's reading from Genesis is often called the sacrifice of Isaac, although it's more properly called the binding of Isaac. After all, Isaac is never really sacrificed. The story begins the same way the book of Job begins – we are told something that the main character doesn't know. In this case we are told that God tested Abraham. I should say so. The fact that this will be a test, and only a test, of Abraham's faith doesn't help me very much. Why did God have to test him this way at all?

There have been various attempts to explain God's action. Some say that since God knew all along that Isaac would be saved, it isn't as bad as it seems. Yet that hardly excuses God's cruelty to Abraham. Some have also pointed out that it shows that God forbids human sacrifice, unlike neighboring cultures in which it was practiced. But why do it this way? Why not just say so, as God is recorded as saying a few books later in the Bible? Others believe that the binding of Isaac prefigures the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. They use the words of Abraham, "God will provide," and the sudden appearance of the ram as the sacrificial victim. The ram will become the Lamb of God who will be sacrificed for our sins. It's curious that this idea never surfaces in the New Testament. New Testament writers saw a lot of references to Christ in the Old Testament, but they never understood the binding of Isaac as prefiguring Christ. The story shows up only twice. In the letter of James, Abraham is presented as someone who was justified by works because he obeyed God. The letter to the Hebrews refers to the binding and says that Isaac was received back figuratively as though he had died and risen again. It's the language of resurrection, not sacrifice.

More than most Bible stories, this particular one really points out the great gulf between the time and culture of the Bible and our own time. It's pretty clear that human nature itself hasn't changed much over thousands of years. Because we can imagine ourselves acting in many of the ways we read, we tend to forget that the worldview and culture of the Bible during Jesus' time and especially Abraham's is very different from our own way of thinking and our worldview.

One of the most striking aspects of the story, commented on frequently, is the long, long silence of Abraham. He never gives any explanation of why he does what he does. In fact, there's not much conversation at all. What he does say three times is a single word in Hebrew: *hinneni*, literally "behold me" and translated "here I am." This is the language of faith. It's what Isaiah says in the presence of God after his mouth has been cleansed. When God says, "Whom shall I send, and who shall go for us?" Isaiah replies simply, "Here I am; send me."

Abraham says "Here I am" three times. The first is when God calls to him at the beginning of the story. Abraham replies and then God gives him the ferocious order to go and sacrifice Isaac. Silently, he makes his preparations and sets out. Later, after the servants are told to stay in place while he and Isaac go on, his son says to him, "Father" and Abraham responds, "Here I am." In poignant words, Isaac points out that they have the wood, the knife, and the fire, but no animal for sacrifice. That's when Abraham says "God will provide." The third time occurs at the most suspenseful part of the story, when Abraham is about to kill Isaac. "Abraham, Abraham!" says the angel of the Lord. He responds, "Here I am," and is told not to kill the boy. Three times Abraham speaks the word of faith in the midst of this awful conflict.

Otherwise Abraham is largely silent. What could he say? God had given him the promise of a glorious future through Isaac, more descendants than stars in the sky. In him all of the families of the earth would be blessed. Then God commanded him to sacrifice Isaac, to sacrifice the promise. The conflict could not have been greater, the paradox of faith more striking. Yet Abraham obeyed.

I do not pretend to understand this. I see Abraham's anguish even in the psalm today, expressing what could have been his thoughts: "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" Like nearly every psalm of despair, this one turns toward the end. "But I put my trust in your mercy; my heart is joyful because of your saving help." Both of these feelings describe the deep conflict of that journey.

I do not believe that Abraham or Isaac prefigured Christ. Rather I believe that Abraham is held up as a model of faith in the midst of what seems abhorrent. But I *am* reminded of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus pleaded with God to be released from what he knew was coming. In the end, he said not my will but thine be done. In Luke's Gospel, some manuscripts added verses describing Jesus being in such anguish that his sweat became like drops of blood falling on the ground. I see Abraham in that kind of anguish. He, too, was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

Both Abraham and Jesus then become models of faith for us. This past week I was reminded again of how that is expressed in the Burial Office. One of the prayers says "help us, we pray, in the midst of things we cannot understand, to believe and trust."

There is no way to normalize the story of Abraham and Isaac. If you can explain it to your own satisfaction, more power to you. I will not take that away from you. For me it remains a continual challenge. It reminds me that my life and culture are very different from the life and culture of the Bible. It tells me that God's greatness and wisdom are far more than I will ever understand. Sometimes God acts in ways that seem absolutely opposite to what I think God should be doing, or how God should act.

Yet I am a Christian, and as a Christian I believe that God's greatest self-revelation was given to us through Jesus Christ. Ultimately I believe that God is love, revealed to us through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. God is an eternal relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who made us to be in relationship with one another.

The fundamental human response to this loving God is the response of Abraham: Hinneni. Behold me. Here I am. I have no idea why you want me to do this, Lord. It makes no sense to me. All I can say is, here I am. Send me.

[Pentecost 4: Genesis 22:1-14, Psalm 13.]