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THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC

Good Shepherd Berkeley

7th Sunday after Pentecost, June 29, 2008 (Proper 8A)
Gen. 22:1-14 [Ps. 13; Rom. 6:12-23; Matt. 10:40-42]

That's a pretty terrifying story we heard about Abraham and Isaac. It must be a very old story, and it must have seemed like a very important story to the people who put the book of Genesis together, for they put it in a prominent position near the end of Abraham's long and eventful life. It's been an important story for later Jews and Christians, too; we've spent a lot of time and energy interpreting and explaining it. But it's not a story we're used to having read in church much. So the preacher has his work cut out for him this morning. And I'll begin by saying right up front that there isn't enough time in one Sunday sermon to say everything that could be said.

For many people today, the story isn't just problematic; it's deeply offensive. It may even seem to embody just about everything that can go wrong and has gone wrong with the Christian religion. Abraham is the all-powerful patriarch on earth. God is the even more all-powerful patriarch in heaven. The heavenly patriarch demands the blood of the earthly patriarch's favorite son. The earthly patriarch is ready to comply. But at the last minute, the heavenly patriarch says, "Oh, this was just a test. Now that I know that your loyalty to me trumps every bit of human decency you might possess, you can have your son back and sacrifice this ram instead."

Not, too edifying.

But it gets worse, from this perspective, because Christians then took the story as a model for understanding the cross. God didn't make Abraham sacrifice Isaac, but God the Father (the patriarch of all patriarchs) sacrifices God the Son to give himself an excuse to overlook the sins of human beings. Did either Isaac or Jesus volunteer for any of this? Is this, in other words, two colossal examples of divine child abuse? of God willing to demand anything at all from humanity in order to enhance God's own prestige and glory?

Now, I don't agree with this interpretation of either story. But I do kind of understand where it came from. Over the ages, one particular way of understanding the crucifixion came to be dominant in Western Christianity. It was a pattern that focused on suffering, pain, blood, and death. It became really dominant in the later Middle Ages at the time of the Black Death, maybe because the world really did seem that cruel to people.

This theology said that humanity is so evil that God is really more or less obligated, for the sake of justice, to wipe us all off the face of the earth and send us to hell. God, however, has a generous streak as well as a commitment to justice. The problem is how to reconcile the two. So the Father decides to sacrifice

the Son to pay the fine. (In the process, we got the doctrine of the Trinity so completely wrong that we misunderstood this as saying that one person of the Godhead was giving orders to another.) So God the Father, by this trade-off, opened a little crack through the wall of justice so that people who happened to be lucky enough to hear the message and believe it and then live really good lives afterward could be rescued and go to heaven instead.

So it's not too surprising if some theologians, in reaction to this interpretation, have seen the stories themselves as examples of divine child abuse. But I don't think this is what either of our stories is about. So I'm not going to try to unravel this particular issue any further. Instead, I'm going to set it aside and see what else we might notice if we look at our text again.

Part of the problem has been our tendency to take the great stories and turn them into abstract doctrines. Stories don't really work that way. Stories create more problems than they solve. They make us think. They make us look for other ways of telling them.

This is still a problematic text, of course. And it has been for a long, long time. Ancient Jewish and Christian writers clearly struggled with it.¹ They asked questions like these:

Why would God ever have done such a thing in the first place?

If God knows everything anyway, why would God have needed to test Abraham at all?

Why would Abraham sacrifice his son when God had promised that he would have descendants through him?

How old was Isaac, anyway? and, given that his father was a centenarian, why did he submit?

They came up with some interesting answers.

First, why did God ask this of Abraham? Some borrowed a leaf from the Book of Job and said that it was the fault of Satan or other jealous angels. Isaac was the great confirmation of all God's promises to Abraham, and the angels felt they were being displaced from center stage by these human upstarts. According to this interpretation, God never intended to let the sacrifice of Isaac happen, but used this ruse to reveal how truly faithful Abraham was and how deserving he was of God's love.

Again, why would an all-knowing God have needed to test Abraham? The long-standing interpretation of the Hebrew text, still preserved in our modern translations, has God say, "Now I *know* that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." But some ancient Jewish interpreters noticed that you could change the vowels (which were mostly not written out in Hebrew anyway) and get a different meaning. They suggested that what God

¹This segment is based on James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as It Was at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge: Harvard U. P., 1998) 301-26.

really said was, "I have *made known* to everyone that you are faithful to me." God knew, but God wanted others to know, too.

Again, why would Abraham comply? Didn't this demand effectively cancel God's previous promise? Ancient Pharisees and Christians (Heb. 11:17-19) saw in the story evidence that Abraham believed in the resurrection of the dead, even though it's an idea never found elsewhere in the Torah.

And again, what about Isaac himself? He's called *na'ar* (a "lad" or a "boy") in the story, but ancient commentators looked at the full narrative of Abraham's life and calculated that he was somewhere between 25 and 37 at the time. Why did he go along with this? Was the act more one of his own self-sacrifice?

Sometimes we read scripture as if it gave us a complete, accurate, and transparent view into the mind God. It doesn't. For millennia, the people who read scripture carefully have known that it's never simple. One reason is that God isn't easy to grasp. We never really see God whole. Another reason is that we human beings don't always understand what little of God we do grasp.

You may remember that Jesus said much the same thing. When he was asked about divorce, he admitted that there was provision for it in the Torah. And then he said, "But that was just Moses. He saw how hard-hearted all you men are and so he allowed it. But that's not what God intended." (Mark 10:2-9)

Scripture isn't infallible. Only God has that distinction. Any effort on our part to identify some infallible source of truth in this world is simply a way of constructing some idol, some more convenient God that we really can get a handle on. It shouldn't be a surprise if religious people still do this. We've been doing it all along. It's one of the most prominent themes all through scripture!

But back to Abraham. We know that Abraham lived in a world where people did sometimes sacrifice their children. Children were considered property of their parents. It would be easy enough for Abraham to assume that the God who had called him away from home and family might want this kind of thing. Was it really God who asked for it, or was it Abraham's misunderstanding of God, or was it even Abraham who decided to do this on his own?

Some modern commentators have suggested that the real point of the story is what comes at the end, not the beginning. God offers the ram as substitute to bring this terrible thing to an end. There are to be no more child-offerings, no more human sacrifices. It was a long process before the message was fully heard. The practice didn't disappear at once from Israel, but it did over time.

If the real point of the story is the replacement of the son with the ram, then we have to ask, What if Abraham had refused? The British poet Wilfred Owen asked that question during the First World War. He was an officer, torn apart by seeing his men killed in the trenches. The fact that he was gay may have

made it even worse for him. And he wrote this poem about our story – one that some of you may know:

THE PARABLE OF THE OLD MAN AND THE YOUNG

So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,
 And took the fire with him, and a knife.
 And as they sojourned both of them together,
 Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,
 Behold the preparations, fire and iron,
 But where the lamb, for this burnt-offering?
 Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
 And builded parapets and trenches there,
 And stretchèd forth the knife to slay his son.
 When lo! an Angel called him out of heaven,
 Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
 Neither do anything to him, thy son.
 Behold! Caught in a thicket by its horns,
 A Ram. Offer the Ram of Pride instead.

But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
 And half the seed of Europe, one by one.²

The story could have gone quite differently. Abraham found the strength to turn back. All too often, people find that we cannot, that our determination is so strong that we choose to sacrifice the other anyway.

Whatever God is trying to say to us human beings, it always winds up getting filtered through our own realities, determined as they are by our culture, our times, our place in the world. God keeps revealing Godself. We keep listening – off and on anyway. Sometimes something gets through. There was something deeply true about Abraham's perception of God. People spoke of him as "God's friend" (Jas. 2:23). But that doesn't mean that he got everything about God exactly right.

What was God really asking of Abraham? The sacrifice of a son? I don't think so. God was asking for the kind of self-giving that is always involved in friendship, that constitutes the heart of friendship. Not that we try to obliterate ourselves in friendship, but that we somehow manage to place our true and close friend alongside ourselves in our own hearts. God wanted the most valuable thing Abraham could give. God meant Abraham's gift of himself in friendship. It was Abraham who thought God meant his son.

²Wilfred Owen, *The Poems*, ed. Jon Stallworthy (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1986) p. 151.

And God, too, offers the most valuable thing God can give: God's own self, incarnate in Jesus. Not an arbitrarily chosen victim. Not a substitute God. Not powerless child doing a parent's bidding. God's own self, exposed to everything we are exposed to. The true gift is always the gift of the friend's self.