

“The Value of a Life”  
July 11, 2021

Genesis 22:1-14

In last Sunday’s sermon about David, I mentioned that the story of David and Bathsheba is one of the most brutal stories in the Old Testament. This morning’s story of Abraham and Isaac ranks right there with it on a short list. Lauded for generations as Abraham passing God’s harshest and most gut-wrenching test of faith, today’s story also begs the question of what kind of God would force a parent to sacrifice his or her own child in order to show loyalty and devotion. Not to mention how the whole trip to Mount Moriah must have felt from young Isaac’s perspective.

Before we get too far ahead of ourselves, though, I want to backtrack for a minute. As the story unfolds, God spoke to Abraham and told him to offer his son, Isaac, as a burnt offering on top of a mountain. Mind you, this is the same son who Abraham’s wife Sarah had given birth to when she was in her nineties. A child Sarah had pined and prayed for her entire adult life and yet had been unable to conceive because of her own infertility.

When God told Sarah she was pregnant, Sarah laughed! After years of heartbreak and shame in a society where the inability to bear a child was looked upon as a curse from God, Sarah heard God tell her she was going to give birth and she burst out giggling...in joy, in fear, in hope, in order to mask shedding the familiar tears she had cried for so long.

Isaac was Sarah’s pride and joy. A gift so precious and unexpected Sarah would never take him for granted. But Sarah does not appear in this story. Not even in the background.

Meanwhile, there is no indication in today’s story that Abraham is hesitant to fulfill God’s request. No questions or objections from Abraham. No screaming or yelling when God commanded Abraham to do the unthinkable. No sadness at the idea that Abraham would lose his son if he carried out God’s wishes. What was Abraham thinking?

And then there’s God. If God needs to test the faith of God’s people, why does God need to go to the extreme the way God did in this story? Couldn’t there have been an easier way for Abraham to prove his worthiness? And did God have any concerns about the long-term trauma this might have caused Abraham and Isaac, whether God was planning to spare Isaac at the last minute or not? What was God thinking?

The answers to these questions range all the way from the flip to the downright dangerous. Starting with the flip, Bible scholars tell us that Isaac was around thirteen years old when Abraham took him up to the peak of Mount Moriah. And many of us

have dealt with thirteen-year-olds before in our lives. In fact, many of us have raised or are raising young teenagers right now

If we're being truly honest as parents or grandparents, thirteen-year-olds can be hard to deal with. I'm quite sure I was sometimes hard to deal with when I was thirteen. Maybe Abraham had run out of patience with Isaac and it didn't take much for God to convince Abraham to leave his teenage son up on top of the nearest mountain.

As far as God's motivation, we could fall back on the self-righteous Christian notion that the God of the Old Testament or the Hebrew Scriptures is a jealous, vengeful, violent God and the story of Abraham and Isaac is a perfect example. While the God of the New Testament or the Christian Scriptures is somehow more evolved. More forgiving. More compassionate. More loving. The God made known to us in Jesus Christ would never be part of a story as brutal as the story of Abraham and Isaac.

But the notion that the God of the New Testament has superseded the God of the Old Testament is dangerously anti-Semitic. The God portrayed in the Hebrew Scriptures, the God we share with our Jewish brothers and sisters, is every bit as loving and forgiving and compassionate as the God we find in the New Testament. For Christians to claim otherwise is an affront to our Judeo-Christian heritage and the faith-filled values our two traditions hold in common...

For the purposes of this morning's sermon, I don't want to guess at Abraham's motivation. Nor do I want to guess at God's. Similarly, I don't want to make excuses for Abraham. Or for God. However hard it may be on the surface to justify Abraham's or God's actions in this story, I wish I knew more details.

What I am convinced of, on the other hand, is that today's story is a teaching tool.

Setting aside what might be said about Abraham and God in today's Scripture lesson, this story begs for us to try and put ourselves in Isaac's shoes. To sense Isaac's excitement when his father told him they were going off to spend some quality time together. To be a fly on the wall when Isaac and Abraham said good-bye to Sarah and set off on their three-day journey. To listen in on the conversations shared between father and son as they trudged along, trying to figure out the best place to set up camp each night, the best path to take up the mountain, the best places to stop for rest and a drink of water as they hiked upward.

The sense of pride and satisfaction Isaac must have felt when he and his father gathered the wood and built the fire. Isaac scanning the nearby mountaintop for a ram to sacrifice and wondering and worrying when there was no ram in sight. The shock when Isaac heard Abraham tell him to climb on top of the pyre of wood and lay down. In the stern, unyielding voice of authority Isaac had undoubtedly heard before.

And the sheer, chilling, terrifying panic in Isaac's eyes when he saw his own father kneeling over him and raising a knife high overhead. There is no way to overstate

the horror of that one deeply disturbing moment. A moment so frightening one can only imagine the long-term damage it caused Isaac's psyche, long after his father caught the ram in the nearby thicket and offered the ram up as sacrifice to God in Isaac's place. If Abraham passed God's test with flying colors, what can we possibly say about Isaac?

In my mind, the story of Isaac on top of Mount Moriah instructs us of the value of one human life. Can you and I hear in the story of Isaac the story of a foster child or an abused child who longs to feel the safe, protective, shielding love of a parent? Can you sense in the story of Isaac what it's like for a young teenager to cross the southern border into our country and be immediately separated from the mothers who gave them birth? Can you see in Isaac's eyes the sheer terror of the thirteen-year-old who heard the walls of the Surfside Condo complex in Florida shake and rumble before the floor fell out from under his or her feet?

Can you catch a glimpse in Isaac's story of what it means to be a teenager in Flint, Michigan, forever resigned to the side effects of the toxic drinking water that continues to ravage their minds and bodies? Or the Rohingya child on the Burmese border who has to grow up in a refugee camp with not enough food or water and vastly inadequate health conditions? Or the young teenager who has lost both parents to COVID and now has to make his or her lonely way in the world?

You and I may not know Isaac, save for the story we have read in the Biblical Book of Genesis this morning. On the other hand, you and I know Isaac well. Because Isaac is not some once upon a time, far off thirteen-year-old in a distant place living and nearly dying in a story that's easy to keep at arms-length.

Isaac is real. Just like he was a real teenager who climbed with his father to the top of a mountain long ago, he's real today. The question for you and me is, "do we see Isaac?" Are you and I willing to feel the emotion Isaac felt? Are we willing to have our hearts broken open in Isaac's memory and on Isaac's behalf?

Are we able to fully invest ourselves in the story of Abraham and Isaac so that when we do, we can figure out how to love one another more tenaciously and care about one another more stubbornly and protect one another more fiercely?

And while we're at it, are we willing to learn something new about God? A God who exists in a world that's not always gentle or tame and a God who refuses to be tamed or made gentle because of it. How do we reconcile the God who sent Abraham and Isaac up Mount Moriah with a horrifying objective...and the God who swooped in at the last second and offered a grace-filled reprieve?

And finally, the timeless question. How much is one life worth? According to Abraham? According to God? According to Isaac?

How about according to you and to me? Amen.

