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St. John's Episcopal Church
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UNBINDING ISAAC
"YOUR CHILDREN ARE NOT YOUR CHILDREN"

Today's lesson from Genesis 22, "The Binding of Isaac", is one of the most controversial and disturbing stories in scripture.

God decides to "test" Abraham, instructing him, "*Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I will show you.*" After two days of journeying, they arrive at the mountain of sacrifice. Isaac, who is carrying the firewood, asks his father where the lamb is for the burnt offering. His father replies, "*God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.*" Abraham lays the fire, raises the knife and prepares to end Isaac's life. At the last minute, an angel of God intervenes. There will be no slaying or sacrifice. "So Abraham called that place, 'The Lord will provide.'"

This story shocks human sensibilities and assaults our understanding of God. What was God *thinking*? What was Abraham doing? What was Isaac feeling? And what about Sarah who may think her husband has gone mad, and is about to lose her only son? It is unacceptable that God would really put Abraham or any parent through such a "test". It is hard to imagine that the God we trust and love would ask anyone to harm themselves or another.

God here is not nice. But perhaps our understanding of God is too limited. God is not only sweetness and light. Maybe the Spirit has a "shadow side" that includes death and destruction. Nature is full of violence, but notably not cruelty or hatred.

Nanette Sawyer writes, "*We should* be disturbed by the implicit violence of the story and by the moral paradox of Abraham being affirmed for complying with the violence." On the other hand, the story may upset us because we suspect the story to be true in us in some way. It probably would not provoke such a strong gut reaction in us if it were *completely* unimaginable.

When we think of God, who or what do we think of; the great Creator, the God who sends prophets to promulgate justice, the God of Abraham who seems very human and, in this story, also manipulative, God the Father of Jesus, Jesus himself?

The way I understand all these different and often conflicting representations of God is that God has probably not changed over time (although who knows for sure?). Rather, it is human understanding of the divine that has evolved. It is always hard if not impossible to extract our human projections from the mystery of God. In the person of Jesus, Christians find the most profound revelation of the nature of God. Jesus manifests who God is and shows us how we also are children of God.

Returning to today's story, "God" is used to make some theological points. Let's look at the context.

Scholars believe that the binding of Isaac was written between the 7th and 6th centuries BCE during the exile of the Hebrews in Babylon. Most likely some form of the story existed in oral tradition long before the exile and was modified to address certain issues facing the exile community.

The Binding of Isaac was likely written for the exiles in Babylon as a model of perfect obedience to God. The exiles believed that God was punishing them with captivity. Because they had flagrantly disobeyed God in Jerusalem, they interpreted their exile as a painful consequence and punishment.

They knew the back-story on Abraham: that God had promised descendants to him as numerous as the stars in the heavens; that the fulfillment of this promise rested in Isaac, the only son of Abraham and Sarah in their old age, and that Isaac symbolized Israel's hopes for deliverance from exile. As they listened to the story, the death of Isaac would point to Israel also perishing and the exiles dying in captivity. The stakes were very high. In the dramatic conclusion, the intervention of the angel and freeing of Isaac meant that Yahweh would come in the nick of time to "pay the ransom", rescue Israel from despair and lead them back home to Jerusalem. Isaac and they would survive to see better days. There was hope for a future.

But there is another point being made here as well. Rabbi Joseph Hertz (Chief Rabbi of the British Empire in 1913) wrote that child sacrifice was "*rife among the Semitic peoples*". The fact that this story concludes with God's intervention at the last minute to stay Abraham's knife was a huge moral advance. Child sacrifice was no longer acceptable or sanctioned by God. "*It was spiritual surrender alone that was required by God.*"

There are many interpretive portals through which to enter today's story. Some scholars assert that it was Abraham who was testing God. They point to evidence in verse 5 where Abraham says to his servants at the base of the mountain, "*You stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will go up there; we will worship and we will return to you.*" The key word is "we". Does Abraham know that Isaac will be spared or is he just dissembling for Isaac's sake? This line of questioning, while creative, mitigates the crisis of the story and depletes it of deeper resonances.

The threat of violence in the story may lead us to confront destructive forces within ourselves. The Binding of Isaac is true for us not because we have done it, but because there is a part of us that *could*. The provocative account is a "test" for *us* too. The bruising trail of redemption it offers is not found in moral repugnance, but rather in acknowledging our own psychological complexity. Redemption lies in accepting this complexity and in cherishing the mysterious God, who loves us especially in our weakness. This God calls us towards compassion for all sentient beings.

Another implication is the claim made for commitment beyond family or tribe. God demands Abraham's obedience and supreme loyalty over the love he has for his Isaac. How might this apply to us? Has there been a time when people like us have

chosen a vocation, a partner or spouse over attachment to family? The binding of Isaac seems to go against biology itself.

Jesus confronts us with similar teaching on priorities. In Matthew 14:37, he says, *“Anyone who prefers father or mother to me is not worthy of me. Anyone who prefers son or daughter to me is not worthy of me.”* Luke’s Jesus (14:26) says this even more harshly, but Matthew’s version is surely harsh enough.

Jesus would take his disciples and us on a spiritual journey. The goal involves leaving all attachments behind, even the good ones. The attachments of the body and mind can drag on us. Like a backpacker who starts out with too much weight in her pack, we too at times must jettison or let go of the things that weigh upon us even if we love them. What Jesus is saying, I think, is that *if* we love our children more than God, we make idols of them. Anna Madsen writes, *“My children are precariously close to becoming my God. I need to question that.”* This may not be true for all of us.

Letting go of family is not the same as abandonment or rejection. Letting go is an internal reordering of priorities over a long time that eventually allows us to return “home” unencumbered.

Kahlil Gibran expresses a similar sentiment in a much more pleasing tone: *“Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life’s longing for itself. They come through you but not from you, and though they are with you they belong not to you.”* (The Prophet...On Children”)

I would like to close with a story Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel tells describing the experience of a 7-year old who hears the *Akeda* (the binding of Isaac) for the first time:

“Isaac was on the way to Mount Moriah with his father; then he lay on the altar, bound, waiting to be sacrificed. My heart began to beat even faster; it actually sobbed with pity for Isaac. Behold, Abraham now lifted the knife. And now my heart froze within me with fright. Suddenly, the voice of the angel was heard: “Abraham, lay not thine hand upon the lad, for now I know that thou fearest God.” And here I broke out in tears and wept aloud. “Why are you crying?” asked the Rabbi. “You know that Isaac was not killed.” And I said to him, still weeping, “But Rabbi, supposing the angel had come a second too late?”
The Rabbi comforted me and calmed me by telling me that an angel cannot come late.”

Genesis 22:1-18

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.”² He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall

show you.”

³So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. ⁴On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. ⁵Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.” ⁶Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. ⁷Isaac said to his father Abraham, “Father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” ⁸Abraham said, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So the two of them walked on together. ⁹When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.

¹¹But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” ¹²He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” ¹³And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴So Abraham called that place “The Lord will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.”

¹⁵The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, ¹⁶and said, “By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, ¹⁸and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.”