

Proper 8, Year A

Genesis 22:1-14

Psalm 13

Romans 6:12-23

Matthew 10:40-42

Today we have before us
what many consider to be
the most difficult passage
in the entire the Old Testament.

You didn't know it when you woke up this morning,
but you have come to church today
to hear a story about child sacrifice.
(Yes, that should bother you.)

This is the story of when God—
your God, *my* God, *our* God—
calls out to Abraham
and commands him
to take his son Isaac,
walk him out to the edge of town,
strap him to the altar,
and burn him as a sacrifice.

For those who assume
the stories of our faith
to be placid, lovely, and clean,
erudite and evolved,
full of goodness, kindness, and all that is fair—
this story ought to boggle your minds
and chill you to your bones.

In almost every sermon
I've ever heard on this passage,
it typically boils down
to an oversimplification of faith:

“It was a test,” they say.
“It was a test of Abraham's faith,
and Abraham passed with flying colors.
Hooray for Abraham.
Hooray for faith.
Hooray for passing the test.
May we, too, be found faithful
when the time of testing comes for us.”

Or, sometimes, preachers go a more psychological route,
and we get an armchair analysis
of what might have gone through Abraham's head—
or worse, what must have gone through poor Isaac's head—
as they made that long, difficult, conflicted journey to the altar.

Either way,
what we often end up doing
is making this story about us.
Abraham becomes just a motif.
Isaac becomes just another character.
All of this becomes a strange fable with a murky moral,
and we're left wondering,
"What does it all mean,
and what does it have to do with me?"

But the more we read the Bible together,
the more convinced I am
that the most interesting character
is never Abraham, Isaac, or any of the others.
The most interesting character in the Bible—
no matter the book, no matter the chapter—
is always *God* . . .
and that's where our eyes should always be.

But even if that's where we take our eyes,
we still have to ask the million dollar question:
"What kind of God would demand
the sacrifice of a child
from his most faithful follower?"

Remember: at this time, there is no nation of Israel.
There is no chosen people.
There is no Moses, no burning bush, no Red Sea.
This is the beginning of God's dealings with his people.
There is only Abraham and God.

So, what kind of God would demand
from his most faithful follower—
from his *only* follower—
the sacrifice of his child?

The answer is:
ALL the gods.

There's a reason why all of this
seems so barbaric and pagan.
It's because it was.

At this time
in this part of the world,
many people
and *many* of their gods
in *many* religions
in *many* areas
surrounding the place
where Abraham lived
were given to the practice of human sacrifice.
This was—for that place and that time—the norm.¹

So when God comes to Abraham
and tells him to do the thing
that Abraham sees *all* the other gods
demanding of *all* the other people,
sure, it must have devastated him,
but it would not have been unusual.
It was expected.
It was the norm.

What *was* unusual
is that God had made promises to Abraham.
He had promised Abraham a future:
a life with children and descendants more than the stars.
Until now, Isaac had presumably been
a key ingredient in that great promise.

But now, the same God
who had asked Abraham to leave his past behind,
was asking him to give up his future, too.

There they stood,
God and Abraham:
no past behind them,
no future ahead of them,
just the raw, naked present
with a huge question mark
hanging over it all.

¹ Dempsey, Carol J. "Genesis 22:1-14, Theological Perspective." *Feasting on the Word: Year A Additional Essays*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011. Web. 27 June 2017.

Of course, you know how the story ends,
so you know that just as Abraham is about to do it,
the angel of the Lord steps in and stops him,
and God provides a ram in the thicket
to be sacrificed instead.

In some ways, that seems too easy an ending.
In some ways, especially for the modern reader,
that's all a bit too clean, too convenient, too contrived.
But for them—
for Abraham,
for his neighbors,
for his ancestors and descendants—
it was *revolutionary*.

Here, finally, is a God who is not like all the others.
Here, finally, is a God who seeks relationship and trust.
Here, finally, is a God who desires
not the sacrifice of children as the other gods do,
but the sacrifice of our own hearts and wills.²

Even when Abraham can no longer see the past or the future,
God's promises remain trustworthy and true:
not because Abraham "passes the test,"
but because God is God,
and that is that.

God is always the most interesting part of the story,
and that much is certainly true today.
But let's not ever make the mistake
of confusing "interesting"
for "simple," or "predictable," or "tame."

Yes, our God is different from all other gods.
He is compassionate, not capricious.
He is merciful, not mercurial.
He is relenting, not ruthless.
But even still . . .
he is God.
"We belong to God,
but God does not belong to us."³

² Bland, Dave. "Genesis 22:1-14, Homiletical Perspective." *Feasting on the Word: Year A Additional Essays*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011. Web. 27 June 2017.

³ Stroupe, Nibs. "Genesis 22:1-14, Pastoral Perspective." *Feasting on the Word: Year A Additional Essays*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011. Web. 27 June 2017.

So if we learn anything today,
we learn that God is faithful, yes,
and that his promises are true.
But God is also demanding and dangerous.⁴

In the end, it turns out
God never wanted Isaac.
God wanted *Abraham* . . .
all of him, right down to the part he loved the most.

And so it is with us.

God doesn't want your child.
God doesn't want your stuff.
God doesn't want your riches,
your progeny,
your property,
your pride.

No. What God wants
is more than all of that
combined.

What God wants is frightening,
but it is freeing, too,
if we can trust in his goodness
and let it be.

What does God want, you ask?

What God wants
is *you*.

Amen.

⁴ Bland.