

“Father Abraham”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Genesis 22:1-14
September 17, 2017 - Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

This very old story has been portrayed in art throughout the ages. In 1965, Bob Dylan gave his take:

*Oh, God said to Abraham, "Kill me a son"
Abe said, "Man, you must be puttin' me on"
God said, "No" Abe say, "What?"
God say, "You can do what you want, Abe, but the next time you see me comin', you better run"*

Then there's an extended pause in the singing. We hear only music, as if it's a silence, as if Abraham is considering his horrible options — to defy God or to sacrifice Isaac. We wait. What's it gonna be, Abe?

*Well, Abe said, "Where d'you want this killin' done?"
God said, "Out on Highway 61"*

The first thing I notice in Dylan's lyrics are that God threatens Abraham in a way that doesn't happen in the text. And the second is that Abraham is incredulous at the request. It all goes down much more quietly than that in chapter 22 of Genesis.

God says, “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.”

“So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac...”

There is a Yiddish story that goes something like this:

“Why did God not send an angel to tell Abraham to sacrifice Isaac?

“Because God knew that no angel would take on such a task. Instead, the angels said, ‘If you want to command death, do it yourself.’”¹

Some find in this story the epitome of faith. Abraham — whose name means “Father of the Multitudes” — shows the most faith anyone could ever have. He is willing to give his own son over to death. And for Christians, those words sound familiar, and we might be taken to Gethsemane and a particular understanding of why Jesus died.

¹ Kathryn Schifferdecker at http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2138

But I just can't get there. I find this story bone-chilling. I'm angry with Abraham. I'm angry with God. It seems abusive and manipulative and I want to run a mile away from it and never preach on it and essentially pretend that it's not in the Bible. My modern heart is averse to a god that would play with a parent in such a way. And I struggle to worship a god who demands that someone — including God's own son — die to satisfy heavenly justice.

I can't take this story at face value and make sense of it. I believe in a really big God who doesn't need me as a defense attorney. So I haven't spent the past few weeks trying to come up with a way to get God off the hook. Instead, I've decided that I'm not going to like this story, but that I can learn from it anyway.

The story of Abraham is older than the story of creation or Eden or Noah's ark. Chapter 22 of Genesis starts with "After these things God tested Abraham." *These things* — meaning Abraham doing everything God commands him to do. God promises land and descendants and relationship and Abraham is down with this covenant. God says "Pack up your things and go!" and "change your name" and "I've got an idea about a *little* bit of self-surgery" and Abraham, Father of the Multitudes, does all of it on faith.

Along the way, Abraham also does some not-so-wonderful things. When he runs into Egypt's Pharaoh, he claims that his wife, Sarah, is his sister, and gives her away to be a part of Pharaoh's harem. He later does the same thing to Sarah with a king named Abimelech. He has a son with his servant, Hagar, and after Isaac is born, he banishes Hagar and Ishmael after Sarah demands it and God gives the thumbs-up.

Back when God got all smite-y and was itching to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah for their penchant for inhospitable violence, Abraham pled with God to see if Sodom might be spared.

After these things, God tested Abraham, and God asks for the son, Abraham's only remaining son, the son he loved, Isaac. Isaac, whose name means "he laughs" in reference to his parents' laughter at the idea that they could have a child at such an old age. Isaac is the fulfillment of God's promise, the key to becoming the Father of the Multitudes. Abraham doesn't argue. He doesn't plead with God like he did for Sodom. He simply gets up early the next morning, before Sarah stirred, and heads to the mountain, in silence.

We don't hear another word until the third day, when Abraham instructs his servants to hang back while he and Isaac go to worship. Isaac carries the wood, and they walk in silence until the son says, "Father!" and Abraham replies with the same words he said when God started this test: "Here I am." Isaac points out they've got all the sacrifice supplies, except the lamb. His father replies that God will provide the lamb. And here we don't know if Abraham is thinking "I'm hoping God will let me out of this" or "I can't say it, my son, but you are the lamb." Either way, they walk on in silence.

And silence between them is what we get as they get to the spot and Abraham builds the altar and binds Isaac. We don't know how old the boy is here, but he is old enough to carry the wood and to ask

heartbreaking questions, so we imagine the binding was no simple matter.

In Judaism, this story is called “the Akedah” — the binding. Some traditions teach that this story is crucial because it teaches against child sacrifice. Scholars point out that many of very ancient Israel’s neighboring religions did such things, and that we find the God of Israel rejecting such a sacrifice here. The prophets certainly speak strongly in condemning in the name of God any human sacrifice. So this story transitions culture from humans to fully animal sacrifice.

Well, okay, sure. But we’ve still got a silent Father of the Multitudes preparing to kill his son because God told him to do it. Maybe Abraham trusted all along that God would find a way out. But this is beyond traumatic, even with the saved-by-the-bell ending. It’s traumatic for Abraham. After he leaves the mountain, he will never speak to God again. It’s traumatic for Isaac, who lives his own troubled life and seemingly does not leave this mountain with his father. It’s traumatic for Sarah, who dies just a few verses after this story ends. I daresay it’s traumatic for God, who will come to know the sight of a son carrying the wood to the place and facing death.

I struggle with God testing Abraham in this way. Abraham has done all that was asked of him, so why the test? And why this horrible, terrifying test? Am I to understand that this God who creates and makes promises and covenants would also use this child as a pawn? I get that there’s something to Abraham’s trust and faithfulness and obedience, but at what cost? A father and son who never speak again? A man who loses the voice of God? A mother who dies from a broken heart?

In the end, this sure doesn’t look like a god, a man, a boy, and a mother who have come out on the good side of a test. So some take all of this together and wonder if Abraham actually passed this test. What if he failed it?

What if God saw much faith in Abraham over the years — enough to put all of God’s chips on Abraham’s number — but God also saw much self-preservation. God saw Abraham throw his wife to the wolves at least twice, giving her over for powerful men to have their way with her so that they would leave him alone. God saw, and God intervened. God saw Abraham twice turn his back on Hagar and Ishmael. God saw, and God intervened.

So what if the test wasn’t “will you give up everything and sacrifice your kid?” but rather “will you stand up to me — like you did at Sodom — and argue with me and wrestle with me like your grandson Jacob will? Will you stick your neck out on behalf of this promise I’ve made, to give you a multitude of ancestors, as numerous as the stars of heaven? Will you tell me ‘no’ when I ask you to do the impossible?”²

If that was the test, Abraham failed it:

Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.

² Rev. Shannon Kershner at <http://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/audio/2017/070217-sermon.mp3>

But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."

If Abraham failed the test, then God had to move fast and do a little angelic acrobatics to redeem the situation. God 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." And 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. So 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."

And then Abraham never heard from God again. And Sarah died. And Isaac left.

I'm not certain I buy this interpretation fully, but I will take what I can get from it. God redeemed an unredeemable situation. I can't make complete sense of everything here, but I know that God does not want us to kill anyone, and God is a god of love, and God, from this mess, raised up a great nation to be a beacon for the world, and God redeems and plucks victory from the jaws of violence, and makes a way, and God provides, and God sees.

There's a little bit of Hebrew wordplay in this story. Mount Moriah, where the action takes place, is literally "the mountain where YHWH sees." Abraham calls it "the LORD will provide" — but the verb there can also be translated "the LORD will see." God saw all that Abraham did — the faithfulness and the save-his-own-hide stuff. God saw how Abraham responded. God saw the look in Isaac's eyes. God saw what Abraham was prepared to do. God sees. God redeems.

Last night, I attended Arc Stories Birmingham — an evening of true stories told by the people who lived them. The final story of the night was from Olive Aneno. Her tiny village in northern Uganda was ravaged by the Lord's Resistance Army — that scourge of the earth that captures children and turns them into soldiers. She survived and moved to Kampala, where her mother died from AIDS and Olive contracted tuberculosis. If you have a horror in your head connected to that part of Africa, it seems Olive encountered it.

I don't understand that either. The world is full of ugly stuff that makes no sense and doesn't need to be the way that it is. And here was Olive, telling us how she was supported financially and spiritually by church folk in Australia, and how she ended up playing volleyball and that led to a athletic scholarship at South Carolina State University and a Master's in social work from the University of Georgia and a son named Felix and a life dedicated to service.

Good sees. God redeems. The story gets twisty and surreal and all too real and there are hours and there is confusion and there is protest and crying out and sacrifice and faith and doubt and there are wild scenes on windy mountaintops that break us. So we band together and sing and ask for help and say thank you when we remember to and shake our fists and lift our hands in praise and we, the people of God, do what we can to offer one another peace.