



The Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

Sunday, June 28th, 2020

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Sermon Transcript

Before I retired, when I had my own parish I used to love preaching on the Old Testament in the summer. There are some wonderful stories in the O.T. and we very rarely get to hear about them. They are usually just the first reading before we move on to the epistle and gospel.

The O.T lesson for this Sunday is from the Book of Genesis, the story of Abraham's sacrifice of his son, Isaac. It is one of the most powerful, profound, and disturbing stories in all of the Bible, and all of literature, for that matter. The story named by Christians "the sacrifice of Isaac" and by Jews "the akedah" (the "binding" of Isaac) has engendered heated debate over the centuries. There is even a Yiddish folk tale 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."

So, is this a story of an abusive God, a misguided Abraham, religious violence at its worst? Or is it a story of faith and obedience?

The narrative has gripped the religious imagination of Jew and Christian alike for thousands of years. Well-meaning people through the centuries, horrified by this story, have attempted to negate it in various ways. Still, there is a theological depth and a rich history of interpretation in this story that should not be passed over. ² It is worth looking at its details.

The story begins, “After these things God tested Abraham” (22:1). And what do “these things” include? God’s call to Abraham to go to a land he has never seen; God’s promise to Abraham that he will be the father of a great nation; the long years of Sarah’s barrenness; the birth of Ishmael; and at long last, the impossible birth of the boy Isaac whom they call “Laughter.” Then Abraham, at Sarah’s insistence, casts out his first son, Ishmael, with great sorrow (see last week’s commentary). And now, God demands a most horrible thing: “Take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go³ to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I will show you” (22:2).

The Hebrew prose of this story is beautiful and succinct. Abraham does what God demands, and sets out with his son. Abraham doesn’t say much. Isaac says even less, and one is left to imagine what they are thinking and feeling. The narrator uses repetition to heighten the poignancy: “The two of them walked on together,” as the father and son walk together in silence on the third day (22:6). Together in

purpose, together in love. The narrator continually emphasizes the relationship between the two, as if we need to be reminded: “Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac.” “Isaac said to Abraham his father, “My father!” and he said, “Here I am, my son” (22:7).

“Here I am” — in Hebrew hineni. It’s the same word Abraham used to answer God’s call in verse 1: “Here I am.” Abraham is attentive to God, and equally attentive to his beloved son. Here I am.

And Isaac says, “See, we have fire, and wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” And Abraham, heart torn in two, says, “God will see to the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And, again, “The two of them walked on together” (22:7-8). Whether Isaac knew what was going to happen is a matter that the rabbis debated. Perhaps he did not, which makes Abraham’s pain all that much more acute. Perhaps he did, which makes Isaac, too, an example of great faith and obedience. The two of them walk on together, father and son, the son carrying the wood for his own sacrifice. They reach the place of sacrifice, and Abraham builds an altar. Again, as if we need to be reminded, the narrator emphasizes the relationship between father and son. “He bound his son Isaac ... Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son” (22:9-10).

At that moment, the LORD calls to him with great urgency, “Abraham, Abraham!” And Abraham replies for the third and final time in the story, hineni, “Here I am.” One can imagine that his tone now is one of unspeakable relief and hope. The LORD speaks, “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” (22:12).

It is the conclusion of the story of Abraham, and it cannot be understood apart from the whole story of Abraham. The story of Abraham is the story of a promise. The promise was given to Abraham, and to Sarah, this childless couple, that they would be given a child, and that their descendants from this child would be as numerous as the stars. And the promise was also that they would be given a land, and the land would be inhabited by their descendants. That land came to be called the Promised Land, because it was based on the promise that was given to Abraham.

What’s more, Abraham and Sarah are to trust that God is able to give what he promises. So they are to leave a prosperous life in Ur of Chaldees, and to start a new life as nomads, leaving everything behind, trusting only that God keeps the promise.

We are to read the story of Abraham and Sarah as our story as well. For all of us, deep down, know what that promise means. We all know that we have been given a promise that life is supposed to be good for us. As little children we would greet each day with expectation and great anticipation. In time we begin to dream about who we are and what we will be. The world holds a great promise.

As we grow older, we may narrow our expectations, but we still believe in the promise. We still believe that life is supposed to be good. So

when we read that Abraham received a promise that life would be good, we know what that means. The story of Abraham and Sarah is the story of our life.

Life hold great promises. But the fulfillment of those promises comes from God. That's the point of the story. And that is what Abraham and Sarah are called to trust in their life, that all the gifts given to us come from God

The command to sacrifice Isaac is a test to see if Abraham really knows and trusts that our life is in God's hands. God is the Creator of life, not us. That is what it means to say, "The Lord gives. The Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

Then comes the last line, and the most important line in this story. Abraham named that place, "The Lord will provide." Which is what he was asked to trust from the very beginning. He was tested over and over again to determine if he could believe, "The Lord will provide." The God who gives us life in the first place, is able to give it to us again.

It is such a difficult story. But when I read it again, I thought of the ways you and I are tested. Can we really believe that the God who has given us life in the first place, can give it to us again? If we lose all that we have, all the things we surround ourselves with, the things that bring us comfort, the things that bring us security in this life, the things that bring us pleasure in this life upon which we become dependent for meaning, purpose, and beauty in our life, can we let them go?

I find two great truths in this story.

FIRST, ALL PEOPLE OF FAITH WILL BE TESTED. As you look back over your life, think of the times when you did the most growing and maturing. Were those periods when life was tranquil and easy or were those periods of difficulty?

SECOND: GOD WILL PROVIDE AS MUCH HELP AS YOU WILL RECEIVE. God not only provides forgiveness and salvation, but also grace sufficient for every need.

The story of the Akedah, of the sacrifice of Isaac, makes a claim on us: All that we have, even our own lives and those of the ones most dear to us, belong ultimately to God, who gave them to us in the first place. This story assures us that God will provide, that God will be present. And, of course, as generations of Christian interpreters have seen, it foreshadows the story that forms the foundation of Christian faith – the story of the death and resurrection of the beloved son,5 son of Abraham, son of David, Son of God. For all these reasons and more, this is a story worth preaching.