

Genesis 22:1-14 – The Binding of Isaac

After these things God tested Abraham. God said to him, "Abraham!"

And he said, "Here I am."

God 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."

So 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.

On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. Then 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." Abraham 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. Isaac 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?"

Abraham said, "God will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together. When 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.

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

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

He 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."

Sermon 6/26/11 "Hearing God's Voice" by Susi Kawolics

In their book entitled Words for the Journey, Reverends Martin Copenhaver and Anthony Robinson write letters to their teenagers about various religious subjects. One of the letters, written by Rev. Copenhaver, deals with "The Really Hard Parts of the Bible." In that letter, he tells the story of how Thomas Jefferson decided to edit his own version of the Bible. He took out all the passages he found difficult to believe or that offended his sensibilities, and ended up with a Bible that was 46 pages long! Rev. Copenhaver goes on to say that he takes a different approach to difficult passages. What he does is that he treats them like pieces of paper he is not sure what to do with. He neither files them away, nor throws them out, but leaves lying on his desk in a sense so he has to continue to look at them. He prays to be open to new insight and understanding.

This is a good way to describe my approach to the passage we just heard about the binding of Isaac. It is one of the passages in the Bible that I really struggle with.

When I was younger, I was content to see Abraham as a model of obedience, and God as a demanding, but fair God, who rewards us humans when we pass our tests of faith.

But as I got older, and began to really think about this story, I just couldn't reconcile it with what I wanted to believe about God. Yes, I suppose I could envision a God who would play with the lives of humans. In Abraham's case, first God promises him many successors, then his wife Sarah is barren, and later they finally have a son when she is around one hundred years old. And then, in a seemingly cruel and capricious command, God tells Abraham to take this son, the one he loves, the one he's been waiting for his whole life, the one who is to be the father of nations and generations to come, God demands that Abraham take him, Isaac, and offer him up as a sacrifice. I suppose I could also believe in a God who is a jealous God, who needs to test our devotion. Perhaps we have a God who wants to make sure we always love the giver more than the gifts. And I could, finally, also believe in a God who loves us and who then blesses us if and when we blindly obey, like Abraham did.

But all that being said, in the end I have to agree with the thoughts Burton Visotzky from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. He says "*When I read this story, I'm reminded of something Groucho Marx once said about not wanting to be a member of any club who would have people like him as members. I'm not sure I want to be involved with a God Who makes these kinds of demands on me. . . . If faith is being tested here, it's a kind of faith I don't want to subscribe to. I prefer to think that God demands a faith that calls for the intellect to be engaged rather than one that just says, "Yes, Sir."* (Moyers, Genesis)

So, while I could *believe* in a God who tests us, who demands blind obedience and total, exclusive devotion, who withholds blessings until we obey, the truth is, I could not love or be in a relationship with a God like this. And looking through the lens of my Christian faith and my own experiences, deep down, I don't really believe that the God Jesus came to tell us about is like that.

Therefore, I struggle with this story because it contradicts so much of what I believe. I don't believe that God takes cruel delight in toying with humans, but rather that God takes delight in a loving relationship with us. I don't believe that God sends us tests and trials, but rather is the one who stands by us when life brings us struggles, assuring us that we are not alone. I also believe that God knows us better than we know ourselves, so God doesn't have to test us to find out how devoted we are.

I admit, therefore, that I approach this passage with these biases. But because all of us have developed beliefs about God, it is tricky to try to understand the scripture. While Bible stories are supposed to inform our faith, it is also the faith that we have that helps us to interpret them. So perhaps I err on the side of shaping the meaning of this passage through what I believe instead of letting it shape my beliefs through what it truly means. But right now, at this point in my life, I can only share with you the way this makes sense to me.

In the beginning of this story, we are given to understand that God is testing Abraham's devotion, and that Abraham is willing to prove it. Abraham is one of a multitude of people who have devoted their lives to God throughout history by his willingness to make sacrifices for his faith. I believe it is good and right and noble to sacrifice our lives for others in the name of God. But as Francisco Garcia-Treto (professor of religion at Trinity University in San Antonio TX) says "*When we get to the point where we feel that God is calling us to give somebody else's life up, we're in bad trouble. There's no such thing as a theological suspension of the ethical. This is at the root of the worst things that religions have done.*" (Moyers, Genesis)

So the reading of this story begs the question: Is it ok to kill people when we think God is telling us to?" And if the answer is no, then how do we reconcile that with this story?

There are many who have struggled with this passage because of this and other issues throughout history. Christian philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard actually wrote a book about this story (Fear and Trembling) which contains four different sermons, in which he imagines four different scenarios. It is his third one that strikes a chord with me. In that version, Kierkegaard imagines that Abraham ends up praying to God to forgive him. He writes that Abraham "threw himself down on his face, he prayed to God to forgive him his sin, that he had been willing to sacrifice Isaac, that the father had forgotten his duty to his son." Here Kierkegaard imagines that Abraham concludes that he wrongly believed that God told him to murder Isaac.

This is the only way that the story makes sense to me – that somehow, in that moment just as he is about to kill his son, Abraham realizes that the vision and voice, the command that he heard, had not originated from a loving God, but from another source. He had somehow deceived himself in his fanatical devotion to God. Norman J. Cohen (professor at Hebrew Union College in NYC) puts it like this: *“The question is: Who is testing whom here? As I read the account, it seems to me that the voice Abraham hears commanding him to sacrifice his own son is perhaps Abraham’s own voice. It’s Abraham’s ego that needs to prove his fidelity and his faith to himself and the world. Maybe the point of the story is how Abraham comes to understand what God really wants.”* (Moyers, Genesis)

So perhaps it was his own voice he heard, or maybe he was deceived in another way. Abraham and his fellow Israelites did not live in isolation. They shared their surroundings with people of other religious beliefs. Many who practiced these other religions believed that their Gods were blood thirsty, and could only be appeased through human sacrifices, especially the sacrifice of one's own children. What David Beswick from the Uniting church in Australia says is that *“What Abraham did was to act in faith in his relationship with God in a context where the people around him believed that the greatest test of one's faith was willingness to sacrifice one's own child.”* (<http://www.beswick.info/rc/resources/13A96Ser.htm>)

Now, I want to be clear that I am not saying I believe in a God who never asks for sacrifices. That’s not what I mean at all. Jesus showed and taught that God does call us to make sacrifices. What I do think, however, is that God doesn’t require sacrifice for the sake of sacrifice, to appease God’s ego, to prove our devotion, to make God bless us and love us.

The verses just before the gospel we read for today tell us that after Jesus had gathered his band of disciples, he sent them out to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons. He told them that he was sending them as sheep among the wolves. Talk about making sacrifices! They were to take very little with them, sharing Jesus’ austerity, his homelessness, taking no extra money or clothing, depending on others for shelter and food. This life of disciples was not an easy one. And it is still a life we are called to emulate the best we can.

Our challenge is not to look for the easy way, or convince ourselves that God’s voice isn’t asking for a sacrifice. Our challenge is to recognize the voice of God among all the other voices we hear, and then obey its call. Unlike Abraham, who may have heard the voices of neighboring religions, today we hear the voices of our own culture. When we hear many voices through television, radio, the internet, through billboards, blogs and books, how do we distinguish what the voice of our God is from all the other voices that compete for our attention? What is it that the voice of God asks of us? Norman J. Cohen says that *“Ultimately, religion has to lead us to life-enhancing relationships with human beings through our relationship with*

God.” (Moyers, Genesis). That is perhaps the best test of whether or not we are hearing the voice of God. Does it lead to life-enhancing relationships with others?

We see many examples of people who are following that voice of God today. Right now I am thinking about a woman who has heard God’s voice asking her to be with her dying friend, as much as possible, caring for her in these last days of life. She hears the voice of God asking her to make this sacrifice. The story of the runner I mentioned in the children’s sermon is another example. He also followed the call of the voice of God.

We encounter people all the time who make sacrifices for the sake of relationships, for the sake of building a world of love, of peace, of justice. We are those people! We have heard God’s voice, which does not ask sacrifice for the sake of sacrifice, but rather for the sake of others. This is how we know it is God’s voice calling, and not another voice. So may we be open to hearing that voice of God louder than the competing voices in our world. And may we respond with hearts and hands willing to make appropriate sacrifices for the sake of this God who loves each and every one of us now and always. Amen.

Beswick, David. (<http://www.beswick.info/rclresources/13A96Ser.htm>)

Copenhaver, Martin B., and Robinson, Anthony B., Words for the Journey (Pilgrim Press, Cleveland), 2003 p 69

Moyers, Bill Genesis, A Living Conversation (Public Affairs Television – Random House, NY) 1996, various pages