

The Faith of Abraham

Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

July 2, 2017

Genesis 22:1-14, Matthew 10:40-42

The lesson from Genesis is difficult – so difficult that we are going to think about it for two weeks. It is a central story within Judaism, so when Rabbi Beth joins us next week, I asked her to speak about Abraham and Isaac from a Jewish perspective. To get us ready, I'll share some reflections on this difficult story today.

It is hard to know what to make of this text. What kind of God would test a faithful follower in this way? *Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and offer him as a burnt-offering.* Some ancient rabbis read these words of God as a dialogue. Take your son. Which son – I have two? The one you love. I love them both. The only one still here. Ishmael is here in my heart. Take Isaac.

At several points in his journey, Abraham was willing to argue with God, but here he didn't utter a peep. Some have suggested that since the cultures and people around him practiced child sacrifice, maybe Abraham did not think this request from God was that unusual or extreme. Or maybe, some have said, Abraham felt guilty about sending Ishmael and Hagar away in last week's lesson, and in his sorrow this seemed like an appropriate punishment. Some have even suggested that maybe Isaac had some physical or developmental challenges, and Abraham may have thought God wanted him to die. These possibilities are all speculation. There's not much in the text to support any these ideas. They are just different attempts I have read over the years to justify the unjustifiable.

But regardless of what led Abraham and Isaac to Mount Moriah, and regardless of what put that child on the altar, two messages from this story are clear: God did not allow Abraham to harm a vulnerable child, and God did not allow Abraham to sacrifice his future. An angel of the Lord intervened in just the nick of time.

When they started the journey, Abraham clearly thought God wanted him to harm Isaac, and he was willing to do it. He thought God wanted him to tie up a child on an altar and present him as a sacrifice to God. He thought the faithful thing to do was to allow harm to come to a vulnerable human being. So he headed up to Mount Moriah in great grief.

A lot of us walk in Abraham's shoes. We are called to see all people as our brothers and sisters, to treat all children as if they are our children, even better as if they are Christ. But we live in systems that tie up the vulnerable and expose them to more harm. We could all name dozens of examples – the struggles of low wage workers to survive, challenges with health care, refugees trapped at borders, the poorest children stuck in the worst performing schools. Vulnerable people are often tied up in situations that cause them more harm.

And those who advocate for mercy, those who dream of a world of life and abundance, those who try to untie them are often told they are crazy or unrealistic. They think there is nothing they can do. So the vulnerable get left on the altar.

The scriptures tell us God tested Abraham. As hard as it must have been to take Isaac up the hill, I don't think the command to sacrifice was the ultimate test. The test came when Abraham listened to the angel. The test came when, in that moment, Abraham realized God wanted Isaac alive rather than dead and Abraham had to change his plan. It took tremendous faith and courage for Abraham to listen, to change his mind after his mind was already made up, to untie Isaac and set him free. Abraham passed the test. The faith of Abraham involves protecting the vulnerable.

The faith of Abraham also involves preserving the future.

Current Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby published a marvelous book this year as a study for Lent – *Dethroning Mammon*. We read it in our rector's study group that meets two Tuesdays a month, with the exception of summer. The subtitle of the book is "Making Money Serve Grace." He argues that money is not a bad thing. Money is actually quite helpful when it is put to faithful use. Money can change communities and improve lives. Money can set people free. It is a gift from God to be used as God intends. Mammon, on the other hand, is a problem. It is like greed or materialism, but Welby says Mammon is more than a character trait. Mammon is an evil power that traps humanity in its clutches. Mammon reverses the proper order of things. Rather than use money to build up people, Mammon uses people to build up money. It thrives on fear and suspicion of others. It takes life rather than give it.

One of many strategies Welby offers for Dethroning Mammon is a recovery of what he calls intergenerational ethics, making decisions based not simply on today but considering the impact on future generations. How will what we are doing now affect people in the future? He writes

"Intergenerational ethics is a key element of reflecting the nature of God, who sees all time and space in one glance. Mammon rises up and tells us that this is so far in the future that it is neither to be measured or a cause for concern. Yet God says, 'All time is mine.'" (p. 43)

The faith of Abraham is faith in the God of all time. The faith of Abraham involves caring for the future.

The founders of this nation were concerned about the vulnerable. The most familiar part of the Declaration of Independence reads, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

They also sought to protect the future. In a less familiar paragraph, they explain that they are throwing off the English government “to provide new Guards for their future security.” They took the extraordinary step of declaring independence from Britain and establishing a new nation because they trusted the future could be better than the past.

But, of course, we recognize that even when these heroic men pledged their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor to these words, they were not living up to what they declared. Slaves were not equal. Women were not equal. Native Americans were not equal. So over time angels of the Lord cried out to protect the vulnerable and preserve the future. The prophets of social change in our nation’s history were angels, messengers from God to stop the knife. They cried out to the social fabric saying, “Do not lay your hand on them.”

Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward.” Angels and prophets are two versions of the same thing. The Hebrew word for prophet is related to the word for fountain. An angel is a heavenly messenger from God. A prophet is an earthly messenger, a person who in this life bubbles up with God’s message.

Those who had the faith of Abraham listened to the angels and the prophets. They listened to the call to mercy. They listened to that still small voice that said, “Maybe there is another way.” They were willing to let their minds be changed. Our nation became stronger because we listened to angels and prophets.

Our liturgy calls us every week to pray for the nation and those in authority. Pray that we will listen to the angels and the prophets. Pray that we will protect the vulnerable and preserve the future. Pray that God will crown our good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea and raise up among us leaders who will love mercy more than strife. Pray that the dream for which so many died will be true – all people are created equal, all people are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights. Pray that we will be a nation that protects life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness for all people. And pray that God will make us angels and prophets, people who speak the truth with boldness and minister justice with compassion. Amen.

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' 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.' 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 himself 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.'

God tested Abraham.