

The Binding of Isaac (17Sept17)  
Genesis 21:1-3,5-6; 22:1-14

Word of God, word of life? This is a hard reading so near the start of the Bible and of this Narrative Lectionary year. We've just gotten past the sort of mythical ancient events and characters, starting to arrive at people who will provide the context of our specific story. Yet here may be one of the hardest stories in the Bible. That says something amid this book that doesn't shy away from the human horrors of war and slavery and starvation and rape and pride and greed and politics and family feuding and all the rest. Still, this story is among the hardest, not least because it's not evils that are against God's will, but appears to be requested by God.

Knowing the context makes it even more tragic, even harder. Abraham is really the first main character in the Bible's story. He's a progenitor, an ancestor, the forefather for almost the entirety of what comes afterward. But identifying him in that role of forefather was absurd because he had no children. God had promised he would be the father of many nations, but he had to protest and argue and wonder and keep trying fruitlessly. Even up to age 86, the father of...nobody.

His wife Sarah sent her slave Hagar as an alternative effort toward the promise. These women drive the story at that point, while this central biblical character Abraham is like breeding stock from ABS bulls. Hagar gave birth to Ishmael, whose name means "God hears" and through whom Muslims trace the story. But this firstborn son of Abraham wasn't chosen, either by God or by Sarah, who resented Hagar.

13 more years passed until three guests, three angels came to visit. Abraham fed them a meal and they said he and Sarah would have a

son. Sarah was eavesdropping and laughed, perhaps delighted, perhaps incredulous (since she herself was 90 years old at this point).

Though they're old—"as good as dead," they're called later in the Bible (Rom 4:19)—we heard today that Sarah gave birth to laughter, literally—the meaning of the name Isaac. Finally, the promise is coming true! Of God's word that they would be matriarch and patriarch of the faith, of a great nation, this blessing that would extend more than the stars of the sky.

And yet instantly piled onto that story and stifling the laughter comes the binding of Isaac, the near-sacrifice. God tells Abraham to kill his son, his only son, this son whom he loves. It's a remarkable story, for its sparse details, for the little bit that is said and for all that isn't. We have no idea how old Isaac is, for example.

It says they walk for three days. At the end, Isaac himself carried the wood that would burn. Did he expect what would happen with that knife? What were Abraham's thoughts on the three-day journey? Much less the question: what did he or didn't he say to his wife, the mother of his child, before leaving?

At the crux of the story Isaac and his father talk to each other for the only time. It's often pointed out there are no words of them speaking to each other after this horrific event, but there were also none before. Their only dialogue is the question, "Where is the lamb to be sacrificed?" And the answer, "God will provide."

As they walked on together, one commentator says it is the longest and heaviest silence in the Bible. What does Isaac suspect? What does Abraham fear or hope? What is going on within and between them? Is Isaac resigned or overpowered when Abraham ties the ropes around him? We can't understand it. Presumably Abraham didn't really understand it. Certainly Isaac couldn't have understood it.

It's cruel and unusual. After that century of waiting for the promise to be fulfilled, as Abraham continued trusting God, kept hoping this dream, this expectation of parenting would come true, for that to be revoked so suddenly in the story, not only as those who have lost a child to tragedy but demanded at his own hand. Awful.

And Sarah's absence in this part of the story feels glaringly painful. She had trusted and hoped in the promise with Abraham. Just as the dialogue between parent and child ceases after this story, so also between spouses. We have to wonder if Sarah's laughter departed forever, even if her son Isaac came back from this experience without a scratch, if it annihilated her joy and may even have extinguished her life itself; the next mention of Sarah in the story is at her death.

So what to do with this?

There have been many explanations. That it's an old violent patriarchal culture is a bad excuse. Some have said it's a story for the Israelites turning away from neighboring nations' practice of human sacrifice for animal sacrifice instead. This spot is later labeled as the location of the Jewish temple, that center of sacrificial worship (2Chr3:1). Others observe it's inappropriate to view sacrifice as the animal substituting for a human death. But even if this is a story about animal sacrifice, why—for the love of all things good—was it told like this? Couldn't the story have been less brutal, less fearful, somehow not hinting at horrendous child abuse?

Accentuating that horror, the model has been perversely flipped by Christians, moving it back to human sacrifice. Jesus gets labeled both as the ram who is substituted for you, dying in place of you. But he also gets labeled as the son, that where Abraham didn't kill his Isaac,

God the Father didn't spare his Son. Awful, awful stuff. Correctly labeled divine child abuse.

Let me be clear that I don't believe or agree with that view of Jesus. But it's reinforced by our appointed paired Gospel verse—even though the Narrative Lectionary is a recent innovation, and shouldn't have some old lack of awareness—that verse pointing to Jesus as the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, words we'll sing again at communion, a meal about sharing life, not taking it. Yet that verse is applied as a thread to connect this story from Genesis into the Gospel of John's theological lens for the year. I disagree. And I'd prefer a different paired verse. Maybe Jesus saying, "Go and learn what this means: I desire mercy and not sacrifice" or "Let the little children come to me" or "save us from the time of trial." Instead we're pointed again to slaughter and sacrifice and innocent suffering.

The most terrifying aspect of this story isn't confronting death. For a long time we've dealt with situations of war or capital punishment or extreme self-protection or the routines of our daily meals. Any of those, we might trace as logical causes for death. But that it's God's request here just seems senseless and capricious, impossible to understand. In a similar moment, Job declares, "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord" (1:21). But we might well be more like Job's wife who suggests he "curse God, and die" (2:9).

This perhaps honest yet troubling portrayal of an unpredictable God wanting a random test leaves us wondering about God's will, with two competing edges in this story—God tests, and God provides, the opposites of a God who would give and a God who would take away, promising versus demanding, desiring life or death.

In that way, this is the ultimate intense story of that struggle and that constant question of our faith: How does God relate to things not going how we want? What we even term as the "miracle" of childbirth is especially fitting for this emotional question, for the enormous hopes and fears, for all that goes right and the catastrophically tragic that can go wrong. Some of you, some of us have held this question of God's nature around longing for children and through pregnancies and as children grow and things go well in life, or they face problems. If getting our hopes fulfilled is a blessing from God, when the opposite happens, is that a punishment? A test? Simply an outcome of a capricious God? Would we say through every situation that it happened because God chose for it to happen, that God is in control?

What about when our faith conflicts with what we like or desire or would choose? Some ancient rabbis tried to explain away the story by saying that Abraham didn't actually hear the voice of God telling him to kill Isaac. But God does ask us to do things we wouldn't otherwise. We wake up Sunday morning, setting aside this time in our schedule. We put money in an offering plate. We offer peace to each other. We eat with strangers and call them siblings. Today we have events about imprisonment and immigration. We address those issues not through legal wisdom or economic insight, but because we believe God is calling us to stand against society's norms, though this request from God may be inconvenient for us and unpopular with others.

But that isn't exactly conceding how horrendous this story is, of God asking for the death of a child. I want us to trust and declare that faith should never lead us to violence, to say that God asked us to kill even an enemy, much less a family member.

That raises the confounding question of why Abraham didn't argue. Three chapters earlier, he had a long debate with God, arguing that God should spare and not destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. But for some reason Abraham doesn't bother to argue for the life of his son. I think that could lead to seeing that, rather than God testing Abraham, there's an element in this story of Abraham testing God, proving whether God would stand by God's promise, whether God would remain faithful to Abraham. I like that notion certainly better than of God testing us, though I'm not exactly sure how testing God has application in our lives, other than perhaps finding confidence in Abraham's results.

In the end, I don't have and don't want to offer a resolution to this story. It needs to remain perplexing and even fearful, to stay challenging. Though I always wrestle to find and share good news in the Bible passage, with this one I'm just left wondering how honestly we need to face our struggles, whether the promise was worth it, if Sarah's laughter ever returned.

Faithful God, we yearn to trust in your goodness, that you provide in our needs. Reassure us of the promise and save us from the time of testing. Lord, in your mercy, **you hear our prayer.**

Your relationship with us is connected to the land and specific places and through animals. Give us wisdom to treat them honorably, as we honor you. Lord, in your mercy, **you hear our prayer.**

You extend your blessing to the nations. We pray that where threats of violence and patriarchy and intimidation still reign, that we can be your people of love and peace. We pray today for conversations about criminal justice

and how we welcome our immigrant neighbors.  
Lord, in your mercy, **you hear our prayer.**

God of sacrificial love, we pray for those who have lost their laughter. We pray for those who struggle with pregnancy. We pray for those who deal with any kind of abuse. We pray for the hard relationships in our families and with loved ones. We pray for those overcome by natural and other disasters. We pray for all who are ill and grieving, especially for ... Amid all these situations, hold us in your loving presence.  
Lord, in your mercy, **you hear our prayer.**

God of our ancestors, we thank you for the faithful stories of our forefathers and foremothers. We pray that your stories of promise continue through the generations, especially today as we begin a new year of Sunday School. Lord, in your mercy, **you hear our prayer.**

Holy, holy, holy God, fill us with discernment and compassion, that we may understand your will and strive for justice and love on earth as it is in heaven, now and forever. **Amen.**