

Sermon  
Rev. Sonja L. Ingebritsen  
September 17, 2017  
Genesis 21:1-3; 22:1-14  
Abraham & Isaac

### God's Promise; Our Response

Please be in prayer with me. May the words spoken and the words received be only in your service, Great God of Love. Amen.

In the beginning, God created, named, and blessed. God saw all that had been made and said: "It is good. It is very good!"

This is where we began our story of looking at God's redemption of the world last week as we will make our way through the Bible in stories this year. We are looking at Hebrew Bible stories this fall, and will pick up on stories about Jesus in the Gospel of John in the New Year.

The first creation story speaks of a God who tames the chaos of the void for God's good purpose of blessing and salvation. Much of the rest of the Bible is the story of the many ways humankind has found to stir up chaos again and again, and the way God's grace continues to invite us to re-create the intended purpose of a world blessed by shalom.

Because the lectionary--another word for the set of Bible readings for the year--can't cover all the stories in this library we call the Bible we'll be skipping over many of them. From last week, Creation, to this week, Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, the story has covered considerable ground. We have moved from origin stories to stories of the ancestors, those who are part of the family tree of the Hebrew people, and therefore of Jesus.

So let me briefly catch you up with what you missed:

The first humans are gifted a garden named Eden. Their arrogance gets them evicted. They have two sons, Cain and Abel, and sibling rivalry is born. Cain kills Abel in jealousy, and finds out that he really was his brother's keeper. Along comes Noah and the story of God having second thoughts about humanity. We end up with the rainbow as a symbol of God's renewed promise to us.

We skip past the story of the tower of Babel, and a telling of how different cultures and languages came to be. We get to Abram and his wife Sarai, but we don't hear the first part of their story in this morning's text. God chooses Abram for a special purpose: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house," God tell Abram, "to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." So Abram and Sarai, and Abram's nephew Lot, and their posse head toward Canaan. On this promise alone. God doesn't provide a Google map or a tell Abram exactly how this is to be accomplished, but Abram and Sarai trust in God's promise.

On the way to God fulfilling the promise to Abram to be the father of a great nation, there is a lot of drama. Emigration and return. Abram passing off Sarai as his sister not once, but twice. Abram's nephew Lot being taken for ransom during a war. Abram defeating the enemies and rescuing Lot. The sin of Sodom's hospitality. Sarai's barrenness. Hagar's body coopted to provide an heir for Abram, and then being cast out. Circumcision instituted as a mark of God's covenant with Abram. Abram's renaming to "Abraham," which means ancestors of multitudes. And Sarai's name changing to Sarah.

A bit later, three angels come as strangers to visit Abraham and Sarah and promise that Sarah will conceive and bear a son. Sarah laughed. Sarah does get pregnant, and they name the son born to her Isaac, which *means* laughter.

Finally we arrive at our story for today. Abraham and Sarah are joyful in the seeing the promise of offspring fulfilled in the gift of their son Isaac. And then Abraham hears the strangest thing from God. “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and offer him as a burnt offering.”

So, Abraham rises early in the morning and takes his son up to the mountain where God has instructed. Isaac himself carries the wood and the knife for the sacrifice. But the boy is confused. They’ve got everything they need to accomplish this except for one minor detail—the animal to be sacrificed. It’s a little like Abram and Sarai lacking that one small detail for God’s promise of many descendants to be fulfilled—a child.

So Isaac asks his father, “So what are we going to do about an animal?”

“God will provide,” Abraham says, as he binds his son on the wood for the fire.

We don’t hear Isaac’s words at this point. Perhaps because they were too colorful to include. “WTF, Dad!”? Who knows.

But Abraham doesn’t explain anything more. He picks up the knife. But before he can plunge it into his beloved, he hears a rustling and looks over. A ram is stuck in the brambles. Abraham unbinds his son, and together they offer the ram instead.

So, what are we to make of this story? One thing for sure is that if we try to make just one thing out of it, we are probably missing something. Our scripture is multi-valent. That is, there are many layers, much like the proverbial onion.

As we encounter the story, we need to understand something about the issue of burnt offerings, or sacrifices. Animal sacrifice is so out of our cultural wheelhouse, we must ask what it meant to those of that time. Sacrifices were made from the best, not what was left over. The best lamb, goat, bird. It was a way of giving honor to the Most Honorable. Burnt offerings as practiced in Near East cultures also had to do with hospitality toward the deity. To offer a meal to the honored guest. It was also understood to be a way to approach God, to draw near to God. While that seems anathema to our current sensibilities, this is the lens through which we need to see it. Abraham must have heard in God’s command an invitation to draw near to the Holy. Rabbi Samson Hirsch defines the Hebrew understanding of sacrifice not as the idea of giving up something of value to oneself and bringing it to others as a way of response to one’s desires or as a requirement, but rather as giving up of something out of a desire to draw closer to someone, in this case, God. Sacrifice has a relational element to it, a longing for. How do we, now, hear God’s invitation to draw near? And isn’t such an invitation something to celebrate?

This story also talks about God as testing Abraham’s faith. God has made a promise to Abraham that through Isaac, the world will be blessed. Does Abraham trust God? What a test!

This issue of God testing people needs to be interrogated. We hear this even today. That God puts people to the test to see if their trust is real. Really? This is a dangerous road to go down. It creates a god who is insecure and mean-spirited. A god who zaps us with bad things in order to see how well we stand up to the challenge. Is this the same God who created and blessed the world? I’m not convinced. And if I were, it wouldn’t be a god to whom I would be interested in pledging my allegiance.

What does make sense to me is that the author and editors of the book are very interested in making a point that trust in God is important. In fact, if we are called to be co-creators in redeeming this chaotic world, trust in God is essential. God has told Abraham that he will be a

blessing to the world through his offspring. How could Abraham possibly be equipped to be a part of blessing the world unless he trusted that God would make a way?

We, too, are called to bring blessing to a chaotic and hurting world. How can we possibly imagine engaging in that overwhelming task if we don't trust that God is the author of that work, the way-maker for that work, and the reason for that work? In the New Testament book of Hebrews we hear: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Abraham had assurance. We must, also.

Another dangerous read of this story as literal has to do with the concept discernment. If Abraham were in fact being asked by God to offer a sacrifice, especially as a test, would God have willed for that sacrifice to come at the expense of another? After all, Isaac was just a child. An innocent. What kind of God would ask a father to kill his son?

Discernment is something we are all asked to do related to our faith. What is God's call? Where is God asking me to participate in the redemption of the world? What is God's will? If what we believe we hear is to harm or sacrifice someone else in the process, we must question whether or not what we've heard is, in fact, of God. Is holy.

Our history is littered with dubious claims about God's will. God willed violence against Muslims that resulted in the Crusades. Really? God willed that Europeans take lands and resources from those who were not Christians in the so-called New World, even at the cost of genocide. Are we serious? God willed light-skinned peoples to have dominance over dark-skinned peoples, thereby justifying slavery. Check out the news from St. Louis about yet another police officer not being held accountable for killing yet another black body. We're still buying this? God wills women to be subservient to men. Say what? God wills believers to be financially prosperous, so therefore those in poverty can be sacrificed to the machine of capitalism. I just can't . . .

Do you see what I mean? If what God is asking us to sacrifice in order to do God's will is another human being, or another part of creation, we'd better be prepared to check our hearing. Chances are, we didn't hear what we thought we heard, and we need to listen again.

As we read these stories in scripture, we need to listen for how the creating, redeeming, blessing God is at work—then and now. So, if we hear in scripture otherwise, we ought to be asking questions of the text.

All we have is gift from God, even our faith. Our response is to participate in the acceptable sacrifice for the sake of God's work in the world. And scripture tells us about the acceptable sacrifice. The sacrifice of praise, for instance—to bring our whole selves before God with thanksgiving. And in the book of Isaiah, we hear that the acceptable sacrifice is to authentically bring our response to God's goodness from the sanctuary—to lead a life that is just for all, especially the oppressed. The prophet Micah reminds us that the appropriate sacrificial response to God is to do kindness, love justice, and walk humbly with God. And Jesus, the incarnate Word of God asks us to take up our cross and follow him. A life of faith can lead one to the sacrifice of possessions, place, security, or getting comfortable with Empire. And some pay the ultimate price of death for that sacrifice, for faithfully speaking truth to a power that wishes them silenced. But we never hear Jesus say that *our* sacrifice is to ask someone else to climb up on our cross so that we can nail them to it. If you do hear God asking you to cause harm to another's body or soul, it's time to sit down and listen again.

A call to sacrifice isn't always easy. And we may hesitate to say yes. But saying yes is a response to a trustworthy God.

Reading scripture isn't easy either. But it's worth the effort because its stories reveal who

we are—the good, the bad, and the chaotic—and most importantly, whose we are.

May our discernment be life-giving for ourselves, each other, and the whole of creation.  
Amen.