

## **“SACRIFICING OUR CHILDREN”**

February 27, 2011

Dean Feldmeyer

This morning's story is one of the most difficult and problematic in the Bible.

Taken on its surface, neither God nor Abraham come out looking very good. That either of them would even contemplate human sacrifice is abhorrent to us and not a little embarrassing. We desperately want an explanation of this account that makes some kind of sense and allows room for the God we encounter in the gospels – the God of love and compassion and grace.

And we want Abraham, the founder of our faith, to be admirable and just, kind and loving, and we search in vain to find those attributes exhibited in this story.

But wait. Let's take another look, a closer look. Let's read this story again...for the first time.

### **THE BINDING OF ISAAC REDUX**

Abraham and Sarah, you will recall, have waited their whole lives to have a child and, finally, in their old age, they are given Isaac. So pleased are they to have him they dote on him and, probably, spoil him rotten.

When a conflict arises between him and his half-brother, Ishmael, they come down on Isaac's side, even to the point where they have to send Ishmael and his mother, Hagar, away.

They are doting, spoiling, older parents, lavishing love on the child of their old age.

Isaac is not just their favorite, he seems to be God's favorite as well. God has promised Abraham that he will be the ancestor of a great nation and that nation will spring not from Ishmael – which would have been fine with Abraham – but from Isaac. Isaac is chosen of God!

Life is good for everyone; things couldn't be better.

Then, one day, when things are going just about as well as they can go, God says to Abraham, “Abraham, take Isaac, your only son, whom you love [as if Abraham has to be reminded of this] take him up to Moriah [don't bother looking for it on a map; no one knows where it is] and sacrifice him to me as a burnt offering.”

Now I don't know about you, but if I were Abraham I would at least say, “Uh, excuse me?” I'd be asking God to repeat that order one more time just to make sure I got it right and then, I'm sorry, but God would have a whole bunch of explaining to do.

You want me to do what? Uh, why? I mean, I'm sorry, but “because I said so,” is not good enough in this case. You want me to pick up the family and move, no problem. You want me to be patient and wait seventy five years for a child? Hey, you got it. You want me to park my tents here in Edom for what seems like forever, waiting for you to decide what to do next? I'm here.

But I'm sorry, Lord, this one I just didn't see coming. This one is so out of left field it's going to take me a little while to get my mind around it.

But that's not what Abraham says. What Abraham says is, “Okay. Whatever you say, Lord.” That's it!

The same Abraham who bargained and dickered with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah doesn't have a word to say over the fate of his own son. What is up with that?

So with not so much as a question or a shrug, Abraham picks two of his servants, packs his donkey with firewood and food and water, grabs some coals from the campfire and puts them in a clay pot so he can use them to start campfires along the way, and off they go on what would turn out to be a three day journey.

On the third day they reach this Moriah – wherever it is – and Abraham sees the mountains and tells his servants to wait there; he and the boy will go up the mountain and worship. He ties the firewood into a bundle and gives it to Isaac to carry and off they go.

Somewhere along the way Isaac notices that only two of the three ingredients for a sacrificial burnt offering are present, here. He says to his father, “We have the wood and the fire, but where is the lamb for the sacrifice?” Abraham, as inscrutable as ever, says that God will provide a lamb.”

When they reach the top of the mountain Abraham builds a temporary altar – what was called an ebezer – and then he binds Isaac and lays him on the altar.

Now this is where the story suddenly gets serious. Up until now we have expected that this thing was all going to work out okay, that God or Abraham would blink or pull the plug or whatever it is you do in this kind of situation. But no one is blinking. This game of chicken is starting to get dangerous.

I think my favorite description of the scene is the one imagined by Professor Barbara Brown Taylor in her book, *When God is Silent*. I paraphrase:

For three days Abraham has been waiting for God to speak, to stop this madness. For three days he has listened, stopping at every cricket's chirp, every whistle of the wind through a tree, hoping after hope that he would hear the voice of God. Waiting. Hoping. Listening. And nothing.

Now the time has grown short and still God is silent.

How painfully each minute must have ticked by. How he must have stalled making sure every stick of firewood was placed just, exactly right. Sweeping the ground around the altar so there is not even one bent strand of grass or one stray pebble to mar its perfection – and all the while listening, listening.

Please, God. Please. Say something. Anything. Just speak to me.

And nothing. Silence. Only the sound of the wind and, in the distance, the screeching call of an eagle.

Now the time of waiting is over. There is nothing else to do, nothing left to prepare.

He approaches the altar, his beloved child in his arms, and lays him on the pyre. Sweat runs down his forehead and stings his eyes but he does not blink for fear that he may miss something, some sign, some silent communication from the God who has commanded him and driven him to this horrible moment and now remains so maddeningly silent.

But there is nothing. No thunderous roar, no still, small whisper. No burning bush or descending dove. Nothing.

Abraham places his left hand gently over Isaac's eyes and weighs the knife in his right, testing the edge with his thumb. If this thing, this unthinkable thing must be done then let it be done quickly with as little pain as possible. Let the strike be clean and sure and fast.

He takes a deep breath and tenses the muscles in his neck and shoulder, raises the knife, still listening, straining against the silence, hoping against hope, tears blur his vision and he wipes them away on his sleeve. Memories flash before him – Isaac's birth, his first steps, his tears, the sound of his laughter, his voice as he talks to himself in play or sings a song to his favorite doll. "Stop stalling," he hears a voice say, and it is his own voice. "God is not going to stop you. Just do it. Do it, already, and let it be on God's head."

Again, he raises the knife, ignores the shortness of breath that is gripping his chest like a vice, the pain that is flashing through his head and eyes, tightens his grip, focuses on the spot, the killing spot, the V at the base of the sternum and...

"Abraham." A whisper which he almost dismisses as a gust of wind. But then, again, louder. "Abraham!"

He stops, the knife still raised, and looks about him.

"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."

Suddenly he can breathe again but his next breath catches in his chest and comes out in a sob. He takes the child into his arms and cannot hug him tight enough, cannot kiss him enough times. The lamb that was dead is alive, he who was lost is found. The silence at last has been broken. God...has...spoken.

And then the story teller adds an epilogue: They look up and find a wild ram caught in the undergrowth and they sacrifice it on the altar. And because God provided a lamb for the sacrifice, they call the mountain *Jehovah Jireh*, which means God Provides.

And on that mountain God reiterates his covenant with Abraham. Because you have been faithful and obeyed me even being willing to do the most painful thing a person can be asked to do, you will, indeed be the father of a great nation that will bless every other nation on earth.

### **SOME TROUBLING QUESTIONS**

Having heard the story we are left, if we are honest, with some troubling questions. And, if we, the People of God are too weak, and our faith is too fragile to ask them and to search honestly for answers, then be assured that the nonbelievers will not be so timid. They will ask the questions and the answers they provide will not be gentle, insightful, reassuring or uplifting.

They will point out, for instance, that the practice of child sacrifice is abhorrent, cruel and primitive, not worthy of a being who calls himself God, especially a being who claims to love and care for his children like a mother loves hers.

They will argue that any God who demands such a thing is not worthy of worship or admiration and may not be a God at all but some lesser entity, possibly of our own making.

And they will point out that any loving parent, any truly loving parent would have told God to step off instantly upon hearing God's demands. Sacrifice what? I think bloody well not! No loving parent would offer their child up to be a sacrifice to God or anything else.

Or would they?

As of February 17 of this year we have sacrificed 4,439 of our children on the ebenezer of national security in Iraq and 1,482 in Afghanistan as of this past Monday.<sup>1</sup>

Fifty eight thousand in Vietnam. Thirty nine thousand in Korea.

Count all the way back through our history as a country and the number of our children we have sacrificed on the altar of war runs to just about one million ten thousand souls.<sup>2</sup>

A million abortions per year, the vast majority of which are performed for the sake of convenience.<sup>3</sup> One thousand two hundred forty two criminal executions since 1976 and another 3261 waiting their turn on death row and no

<sup>1</sup> iCasualties.org

<sup>2</sup> www.historycentral.com

<sup>3</sup> Center for Disease Control

matter what you think about capital punishment there is no denying that they are all someone's child being sacrificed on the altar of our own sense of security or revenge.<sup>4</sup>

Let's not rush to judge Abraham because he was willing to sacrifice his child on God's altar. Just a quick look at our culture and our history shows that that may be the only altar we are not willing to sacrifice our children upon.

The fact is that if this story tell us nothing else, it tells us that our God, the God of our ancestors in the faith and the God we teacher our children to love and obey, has rejected once and for all the practice of human sacrifice.

It is quite possible and even probable that when the Hebrews came into Canaan to occupy it after their forty years in the Egyptian wilderness, they were the only culture that did not practice human sacrifice. Their faith was placed in a God who loved his creatures and cared about their welfare. A god who demanded obedience and faithfulness but who rewarded that devotion with plenteous growth and an abundance of goodness.

Our country may still practice child sacrifice. The gods of safety and security and retribution all demand child sacrifice. But the God of Abraham and Isaac, the God of Jacob and Joseph and Jesus and Paul does not. The only kind of sacrifice that our God accepts is self-sacrifice. All that God requires of us is faithfulness and God counts faithfulness as righteousness.

### NOW I KNOW

One more thing before we close this chapter:

Walter Brueggemann, is one of our foremost Old Testament scholars. I have often quoted and will probably quote him again as we work our way through this series and he offers one more observation on this story. It keys on three small words found in the center of the narrative: "**Now I know.**"

You will recall that the angel, speaking for God, stops Abraham from sacrificing Isaac and then says, "Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."

There is, according to this story, a hole in God's omniscience. There is a gap in God's all-knowing nature and that gap is found at exactly the place where we find human freedom. Human beings are so free that even God doesn't know what they're going to do next.

And if this is true with Abraham it must certainly be the case with the rest of us.

Apparently, Brueggemann points out, God is about to set into motion a redemptive plan for all human kind and the whole thing is going to be built upon Abraham and Isaac and God is not sure they can carry the weight. He's not sure Abraham can be trusted.

It's like that scene in the movies – action movies have this scene a lot – where the heroine is being pursued by some kind of villain, usually a seemingly unstoppable killer or something, and she doesn't know why. Suddenly the hero appears at her side and says with about a thousand tons of charisma and confidence: "If you want to live, do exactly as I say."

Actually, in *The Terminator*, he says "If you do exactly as I say you may live through the night," but you get what I'm talking about here, right?

It's about trust. Can she trust him enough to do exactly as he says? Can he trust her? If she doesn't do exactly as he says she may very well drag him down to his death as she goes to hers. They have to trust each other. He has to trust her to follow and she has to trust him to lead.

But while trust in those movies is created out of desperation, most human trust is built on shared experience. Children trust their mother because she has been a source of comfort and reassurance to them in the past. Players trust their coach because the coach's advice has paid off in past victories. Spouses trust each other because they have spent years together in faithful companionship.

A healthy relationship with God, the story teller tells us, is one based on trust that has been built over many years of common experience. The more we have been through together, the more we have learned what shape our mutual trust can and should take.

This is not a story about God testing Abraham or teaching Abraham some tough-love kind of lesson. It is a story about Abraham teaching God. Abraham teaches God that, yes, I can be trusted. Abraham teaches God that, yes, I will be faithful. Abraham teaches God that, yes, will be obedient no matter what kind of crazy thing you come up with for me to do.

And, in the end, it is God who does the learning. "Now I know," he says. I didn't know before, but now I do.

And because I know, I can trust.

And because I can trust you I will use you as the foundation upon which I will build my whole redemption plan for all humankind.

---

<sup>4</sup> Deathpenaltyinfo.org

The story, says Brueggemann, teaches us that, while God's grace is a gift, it comes with responsibility. We often live our faith lives asking, searching, and testing to discover if we can trust God. We would do well to spend a little time asking what we have done lately to show that God can trust us.

Trust us, O God, and we will not let you down. Build upon us and we will uphold. Create within us and we will recreate. Use us and we will be well used.

Amen.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

Dean has hit on two possible interpretations of the story of "The Binding of Isaac." There are other interpretations and other possible lessons to be taken from the narrative. They include:

- A. Testing. God tests Abraham and Abraham tests God.  
Human beings are inclined to test their relationships from time to time. How do we see this happening in child/parent, spouse/spouse, teacher/student, and other relationships? How do we see it in God/human relationships?
- B. Vulnerability. God's plan is dependent upon human agency.  
God can't seem to pull off his redemptive plan without a faithful, reliable human agent working with him. How does this strike you? How does it challenge your assumptions about God and the God/human relationship?
- C. Trust. God can be trusted.  
In the end of the story God stays Abraham's hand. But if Abraham knew this was going to happen does that change the story? How does trusting someone differ from always knowing what they are going to do? How does this apply to our trust in God and God's trust in us?
- D. Provision. God provides.  
The storyteller tells us twice about God's willingness and ability to provide a lamb for the sacrifice. And, in fact, God does provide his own sacrifice in the end of the story. If God provides his own sacrifice is it really a sacrifice? In the sermon, Dean says that the only sacrifice God requires of us is self-sacrifice. How does that fit into this discussion?