

June 28, 2020

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

“Altar Ego”

Genesis 22:1-14 ~ Romans 6:12-23 ~ Matthew 10:40-42

In just nineteen sentences, Genesis 22 offers us one of the most terrifying short stories in the history of literature. For fear factor and suspense, it's right up there with Edgar Allen Poe or Stephen King. And it raises our hackles from the very first sentence: “After these things, God *tested* Abraham.” I never did like tests, did you? I didn't like taking them when I was a child in school. I liked them even less when I was at seminary. And I really don't like them when my doctor says, “We're going to run a few tests...”

Jesus taught us to pray: “Lead us not into temptation” or, as one modern translation puts it, “Do not put us to the test...” I know the Bible says that Satan tempts us. I know that life brings us trials now and again. But does God test us? Is this the kind of thing God might do to us right out of the blue? What's scary is how the story tells us this so casually. It's like Alfred Hitchcock, with those two or three birds landing on the jungle gym in the school yard over Tippi Hedren's shoulder just before all hell breaks loose. You're reading along in Genesis when it says, “Oh, by the way, after that, God tested Abraham.

And here's the test: God says, "Go kill your boy." That's when the story grabs you and refuses to let go. It's that horrible feeling you have when you've been enjoying a good read and suddenly the author takes a dark turn and spoils it.

We've enjoyed the adventure... Abraham off on a quest for the treasure God has offered. We've enjoyed the baby, Old Abraham and Sarah falling on the ground giggling when God tells them they're pregnant, then naming the baby "Isaac," which means "Laughter." We've even enjoyed the dirty family laundry, how Sarah gets jealous, makes Abraham send his firstborn Ishmael, and Ishmael's mom Hagar, out into the wilderness to die, but God intervenes to save them, so it's okay. But then here it comes out right of the blue ... the dark turn ... the twist in the plot that ties our tummies in a knot. "Hey, Abraham!" God says. "Yo!"

Abraham replies ... a rough translation of the Hebrew *hineni*, which means literally "Behold me! See me! I'm here!" Poor old Abraham is as unsuspecting as he can be... he is completely clueless. God says, "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." It's like God takes pleasure in breaking the news ... really rubs it in. "*Your son - your only son - Isaac - whom you love*" ... for goodness sake!

Suddenly we're in a strange place, alien and barren, like no place we've ever known. This is a world where people actually make sacrifices to their god. This is a life and death God who expects sacrifices from worshippers and has the right to

ask for them. Truth be told, that probably scares us more than anything about this story ... that God might require something of us! That God might require what is best ... what is most precious of all! As it is, we shudder to part with a few dollars or give a little extra time. Sacrifice is a dirty word in our vocabulary today. Sacrifice is something we do only as a last resort ... and even then, only as sparingly as possible ... and even then, only if it's clearly evident that we're guaranteed to gain much more in return. But Abraham doesn't know what God is up to. He doesn't know where this is going.

The opening scene is enough of a shock, and then we have the insufferable silences in the story. God commands. Abraham doesn't say a word. The rabbis note how Abraham was all in God's face about sparing the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, but he doesn't say a word objecting to God's demand that he sacrifice his son ... his marriage ... his future ... his whole reason for making this journey with God in the first place. He just gets up early the next day and loads the donkey ... grabs two servants ... and signals Isaac to come along. Not as much as a "fare thee well" to Sarah. He leaves her in silence. Silence behind him ... silence before him ... silence all around. They travel for three dusty days. Not a word. We walk with them ... knots in our stomachs ... voices in our heads ... shouting ... crying ... begging to know, what can he be thinking? What is he going to do? Oh, Abraham, no, say it isn't so! For God's sake, don't do it!

But Abraham keeps his thoughts to himself and walks with his head down. On the third day, he looks up. There it is. There's the place. Ironically "the place" is another nickname for God among the Hebrews. Abraham tells the servants to wait here ... that he and the boy will be back after they have "worshipped" God on the mountain. But Isaac won't be back, and Abraham knows it. He loads the wood on Isaac's shoulders while he carries the knife and fire. Is he protecting his son or keeping the sacrifice from being blemished? The rabbis are divided on this. They walk on together up the mountain, still in that awful silence. A light goes on in Isaac's eyes. "Father?" he interrupts. "Hineni Abraham says – it's the same answer he gave God before. "I'm here." But he wishes he were somewhere else ... anywhere else. He doesn't want to hear the Isaac's question that he knows is coming next, let alone answer it. "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son."

Does he really believe that or is it just a dodge? Or is it one of those non-answer answers, accurate, though not altogether truthful? I mean, God provided Isaac. Isaac belongs to God. Now God wants him back. Isaac is the sacrifice, so it's true "God will provide the lamb for the burnt offering." This is the last word ever spoken between Abraham and Isaac in the Bible, and even with the last-minute stay of execution, this father and son never appear together again in Genesis.

Long ago the rabbis noted that Isaac was no child when this story happened ... he couldn't have been. He was old enough to talk. He was smart enough to understand how sacrifice worked. He was strong enough to carry the wood up the mountain. They speculated he may have been about 17 ... he understood what was happening ... he could have resisted when his father bound him, so Isaac, too, must have submitted in obedience to the requirements of a harsh, demanding God.

As they walk on up the mountain for a moment, I want to share a story that might help us understand what to do with this dark tale today. It is a funny short story by Robert Olen Butler called "Up By Heart" about this guy Hurshel Hudgens, who learns the whole Bible "up by heart" so he decides he's called to be a preacher. God, who appears to him as a cigar smoking old man in a white linen suit, tests Hurshel's resolve by making his first sermon a complete disaster. (*Been there, done that!*)

Then God gives Hurshel a second test and tells him to remember this story in Genesis 22 ... and slaughter his only son Charlie, and while he's at it, his beloved wife Beulah, too. Hurshel goes into the house trailer, takes up a butcher knife, walks back to the bedroom, and raises the knife to obey, but he can't do it. He just can't do it. He comes out of the trailer and the man in the white linen suit is waiting for him in the yard. "I'm disappointed in you, Hurshel," he says, but Hurshel is taking off his shirt. He replies, "Too **** bad, old man." He says, "I'll

rassle you right now!” They have a knock down drag out, which Hurshel wins with a surprise kick to a very vulnerable place.

To my thinking that’s pretty good theology. Hurshel does have the Bible “up by heart” so when God says “Genesis 22” Hurshel says, “No, Genesis 32” instead ... that’s the passage where Jacob wrestled with the Lord. If you truly have the Bible “up by heart” you will know what God *is* and *isn’t* going to ask you to do. If you have the Bible “up by heart” you will understand when it’s time to obey and when it’s time to “rassle,” to question, to challenge what somebody else is trying to tell you is God’s will, especially when it comes to sacrificing your children..

Maybe God wanted Abraham to object to this harsh commandment in Genesis 22. Maybe God wanted Abraham to say “Too **** bad, old man!” and rassle with the Lord. Maybe God has given us enough sense to understand that we ought not sacrifice our children lightly, even in God’s name, and especially to lesser gods like nation-states, corporations, or morality codes, which are all human idols, made in our image and for our control and used for controlling us. Is it possible that Abraham scares God a little in this story with his blind obedience, so that God has to intervene quickly at the last moment when the knife is already raised?

What do we do with this disturbing story? Some think it is an adaptation of an early prohibition of child sacrifice, which was banned in Israel long before it was

banned by Israel's neighbors. Some think it reflects an early coming of age ritual, much like those that little boys in primitive societies undergo as they mature into adulthood. Such rituals often involve a symbolic letting go by fathers and a symbolic death of the little boy so he can become a man. Some think it is about our faithfulness. Are we willing to trust what is most precious to us, our plans, our dreams, our careers, our fortunes, our very lives, even our children, into God's hands in the belief that God will provide? Martin Luther said the real test of which god we worship is what we sacrifice our children to.

One Hebrew Scripture scholar insists that it is God who is tested here ... and God who proves to be faithful ... who proves to keep a promise ... even when it seems at the time that the opposite may be the case.

Whatever way you take it, the God of this story is a God you can ultimately trust, and that is good news. But this is also a God who asks ... demands ... requires ... expects ... sacrifices from us. This is a God who calls us every day ... in every way to follow ... who asks us to take up our cross and do our part in our time.

This is a God who promises so much ... who leads us on a great adventure ... but asks for everything in return. Are you willing to make that journey? Are you willing to climb that mountain? Do you trust the God you are following enough to sacrifice anything that is precious to you? That's what this story asks us finally, and then it waits in silence for us to answer. May we pray?

Good God Almighty, open our ears to hear your call. Open our eyes to see your way. Open our minds to discern the right. And give us the courage to place everything in your hands. We trust with whatever sacrifices you call us to make, you will provide, and you will bring to pass the new world of justice and light you have promised for the sake of your child, Jesus, our Savior and our God. Amen.