

Trust and Obey

A Sermon by the Rev. Patti Davis
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Genesis 22:1-14
(Year A, Proper 8)
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This morning we are desperate for some comic relief. We can't hear the Genesis passage without wishing it weren't there, without hoping the whole thing is just some big mistake that made its way into the Hebrew Scriptures when no one was looking. It's a story of such appalling horror that good people everywhere are struck dumb. But this morning I'm going to go where angels and smart preachers fear to tread, and look at the story of Abraham and Isaac, a story so dreadful that we don't even call it what it was, the near-slaughter of Isaac by his father. Instead it's called the *Akeidah*, the "binding of Isaac," as though "binding" is a word sufficient to describe what happened. It's a defining story for the Jewish people, right up there with the Exodus from Egypt and Moses receiving the Ten Commandments. It's a story recited by Jews during every morning service and during Rosh Hashanah. Because some stories are so awful in their sacredness or so sacred in their awfulness that they demand our attention. But we're going to have to be careful because we are looking for the link that makes this a story of value for us as Christians without doing a disservice to the story by carelessly identifying Jesus with Isaac.

The story is clear enough, at least on first reading. The stubbornly pious Abraham takes his son up on a mountain to sacrifice him to God, believing this is what is being asked of him, and he's only dissuaded when he spies a ram caught by its horns in the bushes. But what seems clear, if dreadful, on first reading quickly becomes murky. First, there is the matter of God putting Abraham to a test of this order, which would suggest that God can suspend God's own ethical standards and still be God. Other texts suggest that, as with Job, it was Satan who demanded the test and God who allowed it, which is convenient but no less appalling. To my dying day I will argue that God does not test his people --- God knows us too well to need to do so --- but that God walks beside us through the trials that naturally come with living as flawed and fumbling humans.

But the problems don't stop there. There is Abraham's incomprehensible refusal to argue for his child's life when he did just that for the perfect strangers of Sodom. There is his sin of omission in not telling Sarah what he intended and in lying to Isaac about the lamb for the sacrifice. All of the relationships in the story are dysfunctional, dishonest or nonexistent --- and this from a patriarch of the faith! This is a tale full of agony from beginning to end. And it's compounded by the moral of the story conveniently provided for us at the end, that summing up by the writer that allows only one possible conclusion: "... now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son..."

But what we need to understand when we read this story, or any Hebrew scripture for that matter, is that for the Jew, the story and its seeming conclusion are not the end of the discussion but only the beginning. For the Jew, scripture is not a fixed, static word about God but an ongoing revelation about relationship with the profoundly Other. So let's explore, in the tradition of rabbinical schools everywhere.

In some more creative Midrash, it's been suggested that the whole story was a dream. That would be understandable and easier to accept, since by this time Abraham was old and certainly feared the end of his family line, having banished Ishmael, his real first-born, leaving only Isaac standing in the gap. It's also worth noting that when God describes Isaac as the one "whom you love" it is the first time the word "love" is used in the scriptures. So we're reading of a relationship that meant the fulfillment of Abraham's life and God's promise. And often, what turns up in our dreams is what we fear the most. On a more mundane, historical level, this story speaks of the end

of human sacrifice for a people surrounded by cultures in which human sacrifice was the way to appease an angry god. But however it happened and why, it's clear that Abraham believed it was God's will and he obeyed, setting a standard that would serve to inspire Jews for centuries to come, when persecution and forced conversion threatened their very survival as a people.

So however we understand this story, it comes down to questions of trust and obedience. But we must not make the mistake of thinking the two are the same thing. Because authentic trust is less a matter of obedience than it is a matter of relationship. Abraham went off the rails when he ceased to live as someone in relationship with others and with God. When Abraham failed to talk to Sarah, failed to talk to Isaac, and failed to talk with God, he was setting himself up as the sole interpreter and enactor of God's will. Abraham had been promised that through Isaac he would lead an entire community into faithful living and yet he acted alone, trusting no one but himself.

For this reason, some rabbinical commentary suggests that the real test was for the overly zealous Abraham to hear and obey the voice of God and take his child **off** the altar when he had come to believe God wanted a human sacrifice. And this is the real problem with trust. Because what was at stake was whether Abraham could trust God when God seemed to ask something he did not expect! And here is where this story intersects with our lives. Because we too believe that we understand who God is and what God wants about all sorts of things, from the form of our worship to the gender of our clergy to the social acceptability of some sins and not others. We are often so certain of God's opinion on all sorts of matters that we cannot hear the angel of the Lord calling "Stop!" Like Abraham we are admirable in our devotion but woefully lacking in our willingness to trust when trust demands that we change. Our very certainty, our desire to be faithful and obedient can prevent us from seeing the ram caught in the bushes, can prevent us from hearing God say, "I am about to do a new thing..."¹

The way out of the awful mess our religiosity creates is to look at where Abraham went off track, that moment when he decided to go it alone, to separate himself from his community. The way out is in trusting that ours is a living God who makes himself known through all sorts of people put in our lives to challenge and to confound us, to question us and call us to an abundant life, according to God's vision of abundance. And the answer is in being willing to live with God's messy uncertainty when we'd rather have God nailed down. It's the very problem which created such a rift between Jesus and the church leaders and it continues to plague us today, how to be faithful to what we know while allowing that God is a God of infinite surprise, a God who eats with sinners and heals the unworthy and loves the undeserving. This dreadful story is fundamentally about trust, trust gone wrong and trust restored, but different – trust that though the circumstances of life sometimes seem incomprehensible, God is still present, still providing and still calling us to relationship with Him and with each other, though that relationship is ever-changing, ever-surprising.

As Bishop Will Willamon has said, "Abraham and Isaac's story is the story of the struggle to be people who are saved." And as saved people, we look to God for the model and find a God who desires mercy, not sacrifice. It is a model that can only be lived out in community, in relationship with those who are very unlike us, those who challenge our assumptions and like the angel of the Lord, call us to an unsettling, unexpected new vision of life as God's people.

Because like Isaac, we too are redeemed; redeemed and liberated, unbound and freed by the overwhelming, rescuing, delivering love of God. Our God is relentlessly redemptive, redeeming our ill-conceived, best-intentioned efforts to serve Him and reminding us always that it is He who makes a way in the wilderness, He who saves, He who calls us from our stubbornly pious attempts to be faithful --- He who calls us to be descendants of Abraham, the children of a living God
AMEN

¹ Isaiah 43:19