

“The Testing of Abraham”

Genesis 22:1-14

Sunday, June 29, 2008—Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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For years, psychologists have been telling us that people who experience recurrent dreams are likely to be suffering from some psychological problem. With one exception: there is one dream that almost all of us have at some time or another, and many of us have it repeatedly throughout life. I probably have one of these dreams about once a month. It's the exam dream, and while it is common among those who are going to school, it is also common among people at every stage of life, including those who haven't seen the inside of a classroom in decades. The dream is usually along these lines: you remember that you have an important exam today, but you've forgotten to study for it, or it covers a topic you never studied in the first place. Other variants include showing up for the exam without your clothes on, without a pen or pencil, being unable to find the room where the exam is being given, or arriving late and finding the exam is over. The psychologists say these are anxiety dreams, ways our subconscious minds wrestle with the stresses we encounter every day. Somehow, taking a test has become a pretty universal metaphor for life's anxiety-producing events.

That's one reason why I really don't much like the story of Abraham and his near-sacrifice of Isaac. From the very beginning, this is the story of a test. It says it right there, in the very first verse: God tested Abraham. There it is, right there, the ultimate anxiety dream. God gives tests. Sorry, the idea of God as the great proctor in the sky doesn't do much for me.

But things only get worse. As the story goes on it becomes clear that this is no simple anxiety dream, it is the most horrific of nightmares. “Abraham,” God says, “Go up to Mt. Moriah. Take your beloved son Isaac with you, the son you thought you'd never have, the one you had to wait all those years for, the child of your old age, the one I promised would bring forth a great nation. I'll show you the place. You'll build an altar there. You'll put wood on the altar. You're going to tie Isaac up and put him on top of the wood. Then you'll slit his throat with a knife and burn his body on the altar, as a sacrifice to me. Then I'll know for sure I can trust you to be the one to carry out my plan and my promises. Any questions?”

The Israelites practiced animal sacrifice. They did not practice child sacrifice. Child sacrifice was forbidden. It was one of God's rules that clearly differentiated God's people from their neighbors in Canaan and Mesopotamia.

But Abraham appears to receive these horrifying instructions from God as calmly as though he'd been told to go to the grocery store and pick up some hamburger buns. He trudges off with his son, looking for all the world like one of those dreadful, soulless characters in a TV true-crime drama. I can already hear his defense lawyer thinking:

*Well of course we'll offer an insanity defense. The poor guy said God told him to do it. The guy's obviously nutso!*

Isaac, perhaps ten or eleven years old, is no one's fool. He notices something missing, so he asks: What are we sacrificing today, Dad? I don't see any animals. Abraham gives the most cryptic of explanations: God will provide one, my son.

Three days later, they arrive at the place. It's a beautiful day, the sun is out. Perhaps little Isaac is skipping along, humming a tune, picking up stones and wild flowers. Imagine him enjoying this simple pleasure, walking with his father, enjoying his surroundings, feeling safe. Were they holding hands when his father suddenly grabbed him? Did Abraham come up behind him as he stooped down to examine some small treasure? Imagine his thoughts in the next few moments. Does he scream? Does he struggle? Does he try to break free of Abraham's grasp, does Abraham have to chase him and hold him down? Imagine his terror as he lies there, helpless on that altar, as the truth of what is about to happen begins to sink in. Was he begging for his life as he watched his own father place the knife at his throat? What did he see as he looked into his father's eyes at that moment?

If all this is making you queasy, I apologize. It makes me queasy, too. But I think we have to stare down the terror and the queasiness of this text in order to get past the sanitized versions we've been taught. We know God intervened in the nick of time. Probably you were taught that the lesson to be learned is that Abraham was a man of great faith who obeyed God and all of us should go and do likewise. That's the traditional interpretation. I don't know about you, but that's not a lesson I feel very comfortable with. Do we really believe in a God who would command murder as a test of our faith? Even assuming that God never intended Abraham to actually commit the murder, even if Abraham suspected he wouldn't really have to go through with it, Isaac surely didn't know that. Watching your father put a knife to your throat isn't the kind of experience you're likely to forget. When I worked as a volunteer with abused and neglected children in the juvenile court in Chicago, I met a child whose mother had actually set her on fire. The physical scars heal, but the emotional ones don't. Did Isaac go on to relive his terror only in his dreams, or did it haunt him in daylight too, like our soldiers who return from combat with post traumatic stress disorder, where every loud noise sends them scrambling for cover? I can't imagine that his relationship with his father survived this episode. I can't imagine that his life wasn't permanently altered by what happened on Mt. Moriah. Can this really be God, this divine child abuser?

And what about Abraham? Are we really supposed to take as our model, a man who is prepared to commit the most barbaric of acts in the name of faith? We live in a world where some people do commit such acts. As a society we generally call them either madmen, terrorists, or garden variety criminals. Not long ago, a child in this area died from untreated diabetes because her parents denied her medical treatment, believing it was God's will to treat her illness only with prayer. They could easily have cited Abraham as their model of faith and obedience. Recent history is replete with examples of those who have sought to justify various forms of child abuse in the name of obedience

to God, from Jim Jones to David Koresh to the residents of the Yearning for Zion Ranch, the polygamist compound in West Texas. But a civilized society cannot tolerate the sacrifice of innocent children on the altar of parental religious beliefs. The lesson of blind, unthinking obedience in the name of religion cannot be what we are supposed to take from this text. There are too many people hearing the wrong messages and attributing them to God. Could Abraham have been one of them?

The more time I spend with this story, the more questions it raises. Mostly they are the same questions believers and commentators have wrestled with for centuries. What kind of God would ask such a thing? What kind of man would do such a thing without questioning it? Some have tried to find various ways around the dilemmas raised by these questions. Some say, well, it's just a story written down by people to explain why the Israelites didn't practice child sacrifice although their neighbors did. We're not meant to take it literally. Some say, well, that was just the God of the Hebrew Bible, who did all kinds of terrible things. Since Jesus Christ, we have a different God who's peaceful and loving and gracious, we don't have to think about that other God. Some say this story, being all about the near-sacrifice of a son, was only intended to look ahead to the New Testament and tell Jews about the coming of Jesus Christ. Too bad Jews never saw the light.

None of these explanations works for me. As reformed Christians, we accept both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament as God's word to us. This doesn't necessarily mean we take everything in the Bible literally, but it does mean we take the whole Bible seriously. As Christians, we do read the Hebrew Bible through the lens of the New Testament, but that does not mean the sole purpose of the Hebrew scriptures is to point us to Christ. And the God of the New Testament has not somehow replaced the God of the Hebrew Bible; they are one and the same. We have to struggle with the notion that our God has something to say to us through this text. But what?

One thing I won't do today is to offer you a simple answer, a right answer. I don't think there is a right answer, really. I think we're meant to struggle to find our own meaning in a text that is terrifying, dreadful, and incomprehensible. I think that struggle is supposed to make us deeply uncomfortable. In many ways, the life of faith is about allowing God to make us uncomfortable. We miss the point when we make God into a nice old man whose only concern is to help us feel good.

But I will offer you a few thoughts about where this text leads me. There is an inescapable connection between faith and sacrifice. Living in a culture of entitlement as we do, we have a hard time with sacrifice. Tom Long tells the story of one of his preaching students who wanted to preach on this story for his first assignment. Long tried to discourage him, suggesting that the issues of the text were a little too challenging. The young man insisted he was up to the challenge. He understood all about God calling people to make sacrifices. After all, when he first enrolled in seminary, he'd had to live for three months in the summer in a room without air conditioning.

In a world where sacrifice means living without air conditioning for three months, God says that for us who seek to love and serve him, there is a lot more at stake. Sometimes God asks us to let go of things we deeply love and cherish. Sometimes what God asks of us is unimaginably difficult. It is in the nature of God to ask more of us than we think we are capable of giving. And yes, I guess that means that God does give tests, much as I dislike the thought. Does God really expect us to love our enemies? What could be more natural than for us to hate and retaliate against those who have hurt us? Did God really say, we are not to speak evil against one another? That we are not to resent those who have more than we do, or look down on those who have less? These things are impossible. They go against human nature and instinct. Asking us to do these things makes as much sense as asking us to...sacrifice a child.

But at the end of the story, it is God who provides. A ram appears, Isaac is spared. God makes a way when there seems to be no way. That, too, is the nature of God. It is God who tests; it is God who provides. It is God who judges, it is God who forgives and extends grace. It is God who seeks a genuine relationship with us, and asks us to take him seriously enough to know that sometimes he calls for obedience and sometimes he calls for dialogue and the choices we make really matter. We have this relationship because God sacrificed a son.

God calls us, too, to sacrifice. And then God gives us eyes to see the ram in the thicket.

God provides. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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