



The Bind of Isaac
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Ordinary 13
Gen 22:1-14; Matt 10:40-42
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Today's Genesis reading is known in Hebrew as Akedah, the binding of Isaac. Three Sundays ago, we heard the story of the promise to Sarah and Abraham of a child. Last Sunday and this, the story continues, now of Abraham and Sarah and the promised son born to them, Isaac. Despite Sarah's not unwarranted scepticism, the God who promised the impossible **had** delivered. Last Sunday the story continued. Although not read here, Sarah demanded Hagar and her son, Abraham's firstborn son, Ishmael be banished. Reflecting, perhaps, Sarah's fragile hold on the trustworthy reliability of this God she acts to protect her own, to eradicate potential threat or competitor. Then we have today's story, of Abraham striving for faithfulness in keeping with what he hears God ask of him. To ensure the fulfilment of God's promise. We can almost hear Abraham and Sarah's struggle to figure out who this God is, how to be in relationship, to do what is asked, to honour what is promised and delivered.

Scepticism of God, jealous banishment of a competing heir and his mother into the desert wilderness, now the spectre of complicit infanticide. These three readings don't exactly reassure, of the virtue of human nature, or of the God who rewards, calls and demands.

At least it could seem this way.

Being human, we might not be too surprised for human nature to be revealed this way. That such stories are part of holy writ, that Abraham the Patriarch pivotal to the God story of the religions of the Word – Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, is portrayed this way, may make us squirm a bit. The disbelieving sceptic, the not so pure of heart exiler, the one willing to kill the only child borne by his wife because he heard God tell him to, to prove his faithfulness, are fundamental in this divine storyline. Through such human characters we learn of God. Today we might be given cause to ask what sort of God would demand such a monstrous thing.

It's perhaps not surprising that today's story has been much wrestled with over the centuries. Given that it emerges from Judaic tradition, I sought rabbinic wisdom. The robust nature of such tradition means there is a diversity of interpretation, apparently there's an old joke, two Jews and three opinions. "Ancient and rabbinic explanations justify the shock and violence of this passage in divergent ways. It was simply another test of faith. God didn't mean it, having already assured Abraham that the covenant would continue through Isaac. More modern understandings say that it was a critique of the ancient Canaanite practice to sacrifice first-born males." ¹

And then there was another one, "Long before the moderns, an understanding is ... suggested by Rashi's 11th-century commentary, and buttressed by an overlooked line in the Talmud. God never actually told Abraham to slaughter his son, points out Rashi, but only to bring him up as if for a sacrifice [Gen. 22:2]. When Abraham "picked up the knife to slay his son" [Gen. 22:10] he goes beyond what God ordered and God's angel has to stop him [Gen. 22:12]. The

¹ <https://www.jta.org/2015/09/10/ny/unbinding-the-mystery-of-the-akedah>

Talmud [Ta'anit 4a] goes even further and says that the thought of Abraham actually killing Isaac never occurred to the Almighty!"²

According to this, Abraham oversteps, goes beyond what God orders, fortunately for Isaac. Yet Abraham's being faithful, according to what he knows, enacting what he knows this to be. Abraham's trying to figure out what it is to hear God and respond, learning what it is to be faithful and to fail. Maybe what gets sacrificed in this moment is Abraham's understanding of the God he **thought** he was being obedient too.

Interpreters from the Christian tradition have seen this story as a precursor of God sacrificing "the lamb of Christ" for the sins of humanity. But, if we follow this other line of thinking, what if that never occurred to the Almighty, went beyond what God ordered?

When we hear biblical stories familiar to us, such as this, we're drawn in. Maybe we feel obliged to, it being the bible and all. Perhaps because we identify with a character, imagine it's us walking this way. In today's unfolding drama, God appears as a protagonist with whom conversation is had. Which is kind of cool, but it doesn't take much for God who's familiar enough to chat to, to become God who's pretty much like us. And from there it's not too much of a stretch for us to come to expect God to reason, intend, instruct, think and behave pretty much as we do, to bring God to our level. Doing this helps us to understand and make sense of how God is in our life. It's much more comfortable to operate with a God we understand, who fits our world and within whose plans we're included. It's perfectly reasonable that we would use human logic to explain the inexplicable and attribute this to God.

² ibid

If God didn't intend Jesus' death, even for the honourable cause of redeeming our sins, where does that leave us? How does that reframe God for us?

When we tell the story of Jesus, God's son, dying for our sins, do we not, perhaps unintentionally, create a God of infanticide, or of self-sacrifice. It may be a way to make sense of what happened, make it easier to live with the guilt by displacing responsibility for what happened to God. Are we able to sacrifice our need for God to be like that?

Are we able to release God from such servitude? Acknowledge that however we conceive God, however certain we may be, however much we need certainty, such God is always vulnerable before our imagining. For we create God out of our experience, our need, however else can we do so? When we overstep to absolutes, especially if this causes harm or destruction of life, such God of our imagining is the one sacrificed, like the ram entangled.

I began by musing whether the story, the example of Abraham and Sarah might be a story of figuring out how to be faithful. About how to engage in a living relationship with God beyond comprehension yet who acts in real time. What it is to seek, to strive to be faithful, obedient, aligned. And with best intention to sometimes overstep, to fail. Yet such failure releases us to be welcomed and to welcome the beckoning, living God of the gospel.

As did Abraham we search for God, seek to know God. I wonder whether, sometimes, this becomes a journey away from ourselves. We climb mountains, traverse vast territories to prove we're willing, worthy, sufficiently faithful to receive God's blessing and beneficence. The God we seek is always somewhere else, something else, other than us. As if it's impossible for us to discern the divine in us as we are, to welcome and receive the gift of God with us.