

Genesis 22:1-14

The Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

June 28, 2020

I like to joke that if you ask my father to explain something, he'll start at the Big Bang and work his way forward. But sometimes the best way to explain something really is to start at the beginning.

“Why does the elephant have a long nose?”

"Well, a long time ago, elephants had short noses. There was once a baby elephant who was very curious. "What do crocodiles eat?" she asked. But nobody had time for her questions. So one day, she set out to discover for herself what crocodiles ate. She looked and she looked, until she was very tired, but she could not find a crocodile. So she sat down by a bumpy log. "I'll tell you what crocodiles eat," said the log. "Come closer."

Step by step, she did.

"Snap!" it was, of course, a crocodile, not a log, and it bit the elephant's nose. The elephant pulled back in fear, and there was a great, desperate, back-and-forth struggle until finally she got free. But ever since, elephants have had long trunks.

Sometimes the story is mere entertainment.

But sometimes, the story is deeper and richer with meaning than you expect.

"Why do we offer animal sacrifices at the Temple? Why there, in Jerusalem, on Mount Moriah? Why don't we sacrifice children, like other nations are said to do?"

"Well, a long time ago, God promised our father Abraham and our mother Sarah that their children's children would become a nation. Abraham and Sarah listened to God.

But as they got older, they also began to doubt God. To protect his own life, Abraham pretended Sarah was his sister, not his wife – and almost lost her. Sarah encouraged Abraham to have a child with her maid – but then became jealous and had them sent away.

They rejoiced when, finally, Sarah became pregnant. They named their son Isaac, which means, "Laughter."

One day, God decided to test Abraham. He said to Abraham, "Take your son Isaac, your laughter, your joy, go to the land of Moriah, and sacrifice him to me."

So Abraham got up, took Isaac with him, and went to the land of Moriah. There, on a mountaintop, he prepared to sacrifice his son. But God intervened, providing a ram instead, and said, "now I know that you fear God, because you did not withhold your only son from me. And because of that, I will confirm my blessings and promises to you."

Sometimes the story just creates more and deeper questions. Maybe that's its job.

- What sort of God do we follow?
- How do we learn about this God?
- And how, then shall we live?

What sort of God do we follow? If God is omniscient – if God knows everything – why does he need to test Abraham's faith yet again? Why does he need to *torture* Abraham? If – as later prophets make abundantly clear – child sacrifice is a horrible foreign practice that God hates, then why does God command it here, even as a test? And why isn't Abraham offended or at least surprised by it? Where is the Abraham that doubted God's promise earlier? Where is the Abraham that protested and argued with God over the destruction of Sodom earlier in Genesis?

I've mentioned before that the Bible was not written by God or even by a single human being. Our holy scriptures are a debate over the nature of God. I've heard it said that Christianity is like an ongoing conversation: it began long before we entered the room. We come in, we listen, we learn, we make our own contribution to the discussion, and we leave. The search for truth continues to progress, richer for our presence.

So what if, in this passage, we are given a front-row seat at a turning-point in our long Judeo-Christian conversation about God? The story rubs our nose in the grief and tension of the story: "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go on a three-day journey to sacrifice him, giving you lots of time to think about it." Isaac turns

to his father in confusion, and Abraham assures him, "Here I am, my son" - all the while thinking about how he must take a knife and spill his blood.

At this point we want to jump up and shout "No! This is horrible! This makes no sense!" Maybe it is precisely the point at which the ancient Jews drew the same conclusion: A God who promises us the unearned blessing of a future, a God who desires a relationship and calls us by our first name ("Sarah"; "Abraham"), is entirely incompatible with a God who demands that we sacrifice both what we love, and the very instrument of that future, to satisfy God's own curiosity and insecurity about the relationship. Maybe this story is about ancient Jew's decision to turn away from child sacrifice.

In fact, I'll dare to go a little farther: what if they were right about God? That is to say, what if this story is not just an evolution in our *understanding* of God but an evolution of *God herself*? What if, through this relationship, both God and God's people are learning about themselves, changing and being changed? What if they were right that God *really doesn't know* what Abraham will choose? What if the tension and grief growing in Abraham, in Isaac, and in us, the reader are also growing in God? What if God didn't plan the ram substitution all along, but jumps in to protest God's own command – what if God cries out, "No, what am I doing? It can't be like this!"

It looks like we've also answered the next question: **how do we learn about this God we follow?** And the answer is: in relationship, in the same way we learn about our partners and about ourselves: by trusting and risking enough to enter into the relationship without knowing how things will turn out, knowing that joy and pain, surprise and disappointment will be companions on the journey.

And so we come to the final question: **how, then, shall we live?** What significance does it have for our practice of faith and our lives of discipleship?

This story explains how Abraham's relationship with God justified and prefigured the practice of animal sacrifice in the Temple on Mount Moriah.

This story has also influenced Paul's and later Martin Luther's thinking on how we are saved by our faith in God – a faith like Abraham's.

For later Christian thinkers like Anselm of Canterbury, this story a way to think about Jesus' death. Because we were all sinners, we were condemned before God, and someone had to be punished. Like the ram substituted for Isaac, Abraham's beloved son, God substituted Jesus, his beloved son, for us. We benefit from and are blessed by this sacrifice if we have faith in this story, like Abraham's faith in God.

But hold on. Let's not stop asking questions just as the story is getting around to us. A God who remains okay with the principle of child sacrifice but substitutes his own

child for ours remains a problem. Such a God undermines the later Hebrew prophets' insistence that God *does not* demand or condone child sacrifice.

We have seen the consequence: such a concept of God leads to our idolatrous sacrifices to the false and foreign gods of militarism, capitalism, sexism, and racism.

If we continue to send our children off to kill or be killed in warfare, if we continue to allow our children to breathe polluted air or drink polluted water because we're told it's the law of the market, if we hold up quiet self-sacrifice as an ideal for our girls, if we continue to commit the sin of racism by condoning this sacrifice of *other* people's children, then I believe we missed the dramatic evolution between the verse 2 God who says "Sacrifice your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love" and the verse 12 God who says, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him."

Once again, a God who promises us a future as unearned promise and blessing, a God who desires a relationship and calls us by our first name, is entirely incompatible with a God who demands that we sacrifice what we love.

Is it possible, then, that God did not plan or command Jesus' death at all? Is it possible that our God does not command punishment or sacrifice, but rather offers blessing, descendants and a future? Perhaps the God we have come to know, and the God who has come to know us, is not a God who sacrifices anyone's children. Perhaps instead, in his life Jesus points to a different way of love, justice and compassion.

Perhaps in his death, Jesus reveals the divinity in all those who we would sacrifice.

Perhaps when Jesus called from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?", perhaps when our sacrificed children cry out "Father," our God responds, "Here I am."

Amen.

Sources:

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