



Bible-study: 2020/06/28 (St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, McMinnville) – Genesis 22:1-14

[Ask for a volunteer to read the passage.]

Today is a *special* day. The bishop will be with us in just a few moments to confirm a very large number of our youngest members, and I'll need to be ready to help him "find his feet" when he does arrive. This session, therefore, will be brief. But I didn't want to forego it altogether. Why? Because: 'Without question, this narrative [we just heard from *Genesis*] is one of the most shocking and memorable in the whole Bible.'¹ *How* could God ask Abraham to do something so monstrous? – to kill his son; his heir. How do we reconcile such a demand with the character of the One who is not just *called* "lov-ing," possessing that one attribute among others, but is identified (in the New Testament) as 'Love' *itself*, capitalized? [1 Jn. 4:8] Is this a paradox? Allow me an extended quote from the Christian apologist, Paul Copan: 'This text contains clues – some of them subtle – to help us better understand what takes place in his powerful, perplexing narrative. ... Four things [in particular] about God's character emerge as we work through *Genesis* 22.'

First, we're immediately tipped off as to the fact that God is *testing* Abraham (v.1). God doesn't intend for Isaac to be sacrificed. [Although, n]o, Abraham isn't yet aware[, that is, certain] of what the reader knows – namely, this is only a test.

Second, even the hard command to Abraham is [actually] cushioned by God's tenderness.'² Says Copan, although this proposed 'tenderness' doesn't really come through in the N.R.S.V. A better translation, he claims, of the original Hebrew, would be, "*Please* take your son...", or, as another scholar translates it, "*Take, I beg of you, your only son.*" [Louis Berman agrees, "'Take now thy son'...is not a direct command; it has more of the connotation of a request. ('I wish you would...')"³] God is[, then,] remarkably gentle as He gives a difficult order. This type of divine command (as a plea) is rare. Old Testament commentator Gordon Wenham sees here 'a hint that the Lord appreciates the costliness of what he is asking.' God understands the magnitude of this difficult task. In fact, one commentator states that God is not demanding here; thus, if Abraham couldn't see God's broader purposes and so couldn't bring himself to do [what was asked], he wouldn't incur any guilt in declining God's plea.

A third indication of God's good character highlights His faithfulness. God reminded Abraham of "your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac" (v.2). God's covenant acknowledgment is apparent: the divine promise to Abraham can't be fulfilled without Isaac. Abraham is struggling to keep two

¹ See: 'Genesis' (1999), in Radmacher, Earl D.; Allen, Ronald B., & House, H. Wayne (Eds.), *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Commentary*, Nashville, T. N.: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 42.

² *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament* (2011), Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 47.

³ *The Akedah: The Binding of Isaac* (1997), Northvale, N. J.: Jason Aronson, Inc., 14.

things in mind: his deep love for Isaac is good and right, and the circumstances surrounding Isaac's birth clearly showed that God was fulfilling his covenant promise to Abraham. While this is the most fearful and dreadful thing Abraham would ever have to do, he is trying to come to terms with just how God would fulfil His promise through Isaac.

A fourth reminder of God's faithful [*non-sadistic*] character is that God is sending Abraham to a mountain in the region of *Moriah* – derived from the Hebrew word *ra'ah*, [which means] “[to] provide, reveal, show.” ... So, in the very word *Moriah* we have a hint of salvation and deliverance. [As] Wenham helpfully observes, “Salvation is thus promised in the very decree that sounds like annihilation.”⁴

But still, one might protest: “*He shouldn't have asked such a thing!* Even *if* (omniscient (all-knowing)) God could “see” – or predict – that Abraham would guess something was “afoot” – as He perhaps he might; that Abraham, given his *unqualifiedly* positive experience of the Lord up to that point – experience of the ‘things’ mentioned in verse one after which today's episode takes place – would suspect that such a “plea” was therefore out-of-character and so not to be taken at “face-value,” the idea (flirted with) was so repellent that it shouldn't even have to be entertained by anyone.” Right? Or is it's God's prerogative – given who He is and what He has done – to ask what He wants of whom He wants and when He wants? This proposition, I think, is what truly separates the converted from the unconverted: Robert Deffinbaugh, for example, speaking about the final plague against Egypt – the death of the first-born sons, asserts: ‘God is free to dispose of His creatures’.⁵ Do you agree? John Calvin, the great (sixteenth-century) Reformer, puts it like this, drawing on Abraham's example: ‘as [if] with closed eyes, he goes whither he is directed. [And t]he truth of God deserves this honor... It remains for every one of us to apply this example to himself.’⁶ Notice the lack of qualification.

Now, the person who thinks that *they* are the pinnacle of the universe; who thinks that they belong to themselves, will struggle at this thought. *I* struggle with this thought. But, abstractly, it is undeniable. God made me. And He needn't have done. And He made everything else too, which He also could have refrained from doing. Even now, say the Scriptures, He is *allowing* my existence. I am, then, like the Lego building bricks my Poppy likes to play with. And just as she has every right to destroy and rebuild with those bricks, so God is entitled to do similar with me, no? Again, permit me to say what a difficult truth this is to “swallow.” It is a revolution against the ego. Yet, “I am but dust and to dust I shall return.” (Except for the means of grace and the hope of eternal life made possible by God also, through His son.)

But anyway, I want us to “circle back” to the suggestion that Abraham likely guessed that God wasn't going to follow through on such a heartless, murderous plan. Was it so unthinkable? Does the thesis that Abraham was confident in the goodness of God “line up” with his mute response? (Look again at verses two and three if you need to: Abraham says *nothing*. He just saddles

⁴ Copan (2011), 47-48.

⁵ See: <https://bible.org/seriespage/11-sovereignty-god-salvation-romans-9>.

⁶ *Commentary on Genesis: Volume I*, Grand Rapids, M. I.: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 436-237, available at <https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.html>.

the donkey and ‘set out’. The silence is ominous, sinister, *foreboding*. Is it meant to be? Is it just my imagination? Because my impression is only reinforced by Abraham’s lack of candour – with the servants. And his evasiveness when questioned by Isaac.

It also needs to be acknowledged that we have different underlying ideas than Abraham about what God might plausibly or implausibly ask of someone. *Abraham* lived in a world where children *were* sacrificed by people who sincerely thought that their deities expected as much of them. Evidence that it was a *widespread* practice in Canaan – the country where our episode takes place – surfaces *repeatedly* in the historical and prophetic books. Usually in connection with the horned demon, ‘Molech’: [see [Lev. 18:21, 20:2-5](#)]. But there’s evidence from mass-graves in Mesopotamia too, *precisely* where Abraham was raised:

‘Human sacrifices are rare in history [outside of Central America⁷], yet...[o]ne of the most striking examples...is the Royal Cemetery at Ur...[where t]he situation...seems clear cut. In several cases the principal burial is accompanied, in the same tomb, by dozens of well-equipped and adorned retainers, primarily women, all appearing to have died and been laid out at the same time, probably as part of the funerary ritual. ... [And w]hile the majority of [those] skeletal remains were not kept by [the archaeologist who found them] after excavations, the skulls of two individuals (a male soldier and a female) were recently re-examined in Pennsylvania, and clearly displayed blunt force trauma to the head, which was probably the cause of death.’⁸

As people of the *New Testament*, knowing – *rejoicing(!)* – that God became Jesus to hang *Himself* on the cross, to be “the (sacrificial) Lamb” – *we* benefit from hindsight – *insight* – that Abraham did *not* enjoy. God’s request, however, in Abraham’s estimation, horrifyingly, was *congruent* with the prevailing religious ideas. And *I* think he very well *might* have been terrified that this God he had come to know and trust, who *seemed* unique, was “returning to form.” That is to say, *contextually*-speaking, God became, (in Abraham’s perception), *more* god-like by this murderous request, (not less).

Indeed, it is the Abraham who dutifully obeys heavenly direction to put to death his own son, not just outwardly expecting all the while for God to intercede, but *fully* expecting to have to go through with it that deserves to be called, “Father of nations;” to be held up as a hero of faith second in rank only to Jesus Himself. Martin Luther, in fact, called Abraham a *Wundermänner*.⁹ (A “wonder-man.”) A person of such extreme holy quality that he said about him: ‘[He is] beyond the law, beyond example and consequence.’¹⁰ What do you think?

⁷ See: Hanson, Victor Davis (2002), *Why the West Has Won: Nine Landmark Battles in the Brutal History of Western Victory*, New York, N. Y.: Faber & Faber, 194-195.

⁸ Hikade, Thomas and Roy, Jane (2016), ‘Human Sacrifice in Pre- and Early Dynastic Egypt: What DO You Want to Find?’, in Arbel, V. Daphna; Burns, Paul C.; Cousland, J. R. C.; Menkis, Richard; & Neufeld, Dietmar (Eds.), *Not Sparing the Child: Human Sacrifice in the Ancient World and Beyond – Studies in Honor of Professor Paul G. Mosca*, London; New York, N. Y.: Bloomsbury / T. & T. Clark, pp. 18-51, 40-41.

⁹ Palmer, Elizabeth (2017), *Faith in a Hidden God: Luther, Kierkegaard, and the Binding Of Isaac*, Minneapolis, M. N.: Fortress Press, 108.

¹⁰ *Supra*.