

Proper 8 A 2011

Genesis 22:1-14
Psalm 13
Romans 6:12-23
Matthew 10:40-42

Fear and trembling,
Outrage,
A pretended indifference –
We can react in any number of ways
To the appalling, awesome,
Incomprehensible story
Of Abraham and Isaac.

"I don't have any problem with it at all,"
a friend said to me once.
"I just choose to see it in historical critical terms.
It's a myth about the moment
In the ancient near east
When child sacrifice became unacceptable."
Having put the story in a locked box,
Shutting it up with a convenient explanation,
He shut his mouth and glared at me,
Daring me to open the box
And let the story out again
To work its power.

We all have places we can't go,
And I guess this story was one of those for him.
And perhaps it is for you.
But for me,
This story presents an endless challenge.
I cannot stay away from it;
I am always hoping that someday,
Through the terror,
Will come some insight,
Some illumination.

In the meanwhile,

I turn again and again
To the many words
That so many minds
Have wrapped around this story.

Kierkegaard, of course,
Makes Abraham the hero
Of an existential drama,
The knight of faith
Who, against all reason and in defiance of the ethical
bows to the will of the Absolute
And, by a paradoxical leap,
Wins through to faith.

The literary critic Erich Auerbach,
In contrasting Greek and Hebrew representations of the world,
Focuses on this story
As the quintessential example
Of the spare style of Hebrew scripture,
Showing how in its lack of any detail,
Its telling only of what is most necessary,
it builds an almost unbearable suspense.

The rabbis, in another era of Hebrew storytelling,
returned again and again
To this milestone in the story of faith,
Questioning God's intentions,
Abraham's righteousness,
And even whether he made a mistake,
And even whether, in the original telling, Isaac survived.

In one midrash,
The rabbis make a bridge between this chapter of Genesis
And the next,
In which Abraham's wife,
Isaac's mother Sarah dies.
How did Sarah die? they asked.
Here is the midrash:

When Sarah heard what Abraham had even considered
She dropped dead.

Feminist and liberation perspectives
Often stop here,
With Sarah lying dead
When she learns
That Abraham could even imagine
Obeying God's command.
Or, perhaps, when she learned
That Abraham could even imagine
That God would ask such a thing.

Because, of course,
From our perspective,
Informed by psychological insight
And a different understanding
Of the mysteries of the human mind
We wonder whether it's ever possible to trust
That someone could truly hear the voice of God saying
"Kill" or even "sacrifice."
The rabbis, too, considered this question,
Long ago,
And responded,
If Abraham were mad,
Could he have become the exemplar of faith
For thousands of generations?

Pondering that question
Might lead us away from the story,
Which often feels safer than returning to it.

And, of course,
I'm doing the same thing,
Keeping the story at arm's length,
Laying out critiques and perspectives
And theories.

For years, to be honest,
I refused to encounter the story at all,
Saying, simply,
The god who would ask that is not my God,
And so this story is not relevant to my faith life.

Or, on other days, I would say,
All the ways I know of making sense of this story
Fall apart for me,
Because they are based on the assumption
That Isaac actually does belong to Abraham.
They come out of world view
That does not, ultimately, question
Whether women and children belong to men.
And so this is a legitimate,
If terrible, dilemma.
You can construct meaning,
In that case,
Out of the statement,
God asks Abraham to give up his most precious possession.

But if you begin from the premise
That Isaac does not belong to Abraham,
But is, in fact, an autonomous human being
With his own inalienable rights,
Then many of the ways of encountering the story,
Many of the ways which turn it into a comprehensible,
If painful, story of great faith,
These ways become nonsense.

There are many ways
Of keeping this story at a distance.
And for some of us,
Sometimes, that is important for our safety,
Or our wellbeing.
Sometimes,
For some people,
This story comes too close to home.

But for others of us,
There comes a time for saying,
This story lies at the heart of my faith,
And perhaps I am ready
To stand before it,
Not expecting to make sense of it,
Not even expecting to win a gift from it,
But, strangely, doing my duty.

Because this story can make us humble.
This story can help us remember
That it is a fearful and awesome thing
To fall into the hands of the living God.

This story can help us remember that there are times
When we don't know what to do,
Or when we fear there is no right way to act.

What happens in the dark moments
When we wonder what we ought to do?
Are we ever called to act
In ways that seem immoral and inexplicable?
Are we ever led to a place
Where the unthinkable is the only thing possible?

We carry within us seeds of darkness,
And this story of binding and sacrifice
Is not always a story of faith.
And that's where it begins to make sense to me.

The only treatment of this story
That makes sense to me through the years
Is the poem of Wilfred Owen,
The poet of war, and the pity of war.
After recounting the story
Even more briefly than it's told in Genesis,
He reaches the moment

When the angel tells Abraham to stay his hand.
"But," the poem ends,
"the old man would not so, but slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one."

We know this is true.
We know we are set up
In such a way that this happens
In war, in families,
In systems.

From the Greek king Agamemnon,
Who willingly sacrificed his daughter
To appease the gods,
So that they would let him start a long and fruitless war,
Down to our own time,
When we allow children to die from neglect,
Rather than devoting our resources to them,
and when we tolerate endless murders
That would not happen if we had fewer guns,
We sacrifice others
On the altar of our own needs and wants.

This story, of Abraham and Isaac,
Might for some be a story of great faith.

But it also might be a story that shows us who we are.
If we are honest,
Then sometimes we understand that killing others,
Or asking them to die for us,
Rather than dying for them,
Is something we all might do,
Unwillingly or on purpose.

And if this is who we are,
Then we are, beyond all doubt,
In need of the mercy of God.
In need of the God who is mercy.

Some people find God's mercy
Embedded in the story.
The ram, trapped by its horns,
is for many the very image of God's mercy.
The ram is the lamb
God provides for the slaughter.

This story is an option for reading
At the Great Vigil of Easter,
And when it's read then,
It sets in motion,
Inevitably,
An understanding of the ram as Jesus,
And an understanding of Jesus' death
As a sacrifice for our sins.

It is not necessary to believe this.
We are not stuck in this story.

There are other ways
Of making peace with God.

And so, with fear and trembling,
I offer a different midrash.
Not a midrash, exactly,
But a re-imagining of the story.

What happened when God called to Abraham,
And Abraham said, Here am I,
And God said,
Take your son, your only son,
Whom you love,
And offer him as a burnt offering?

Abraham, the man who had stood before God
Arguing on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah,
The Abraham who said,

Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?
That Abraham said –

Have mercy on me.
I put my trust in your mercy.

Don't be that kind of god.
Don't ask me to turn into that kind of person.

Be now the God you are becoming,
So that I can be, in your image,
The kind of human being
You would have me become.

Be the God who unbinds,
Unburdens,
And makes whole.

Be the God who desires mercy, not sacrifice,
And let me offer you my heart and soul,
Instead of my flesh and blood.

And God said,
It is good.

That would be one way of re-telling the story.
There are many others.

Some might say,
That's not the story,
And the story can't be changed,
Any more than the past can be changed.

But I might argue that,
Just as we can imagine a different story,
So, by grace, we might be able to imagine
And create
A different future.

We are not stuck
With the choices or the patterns of the past.

There is no simpler way to tell the gospel than this
Change is possible,
And we have a choice to turn around,
And welcome a new story into our midst.

We have a choice
To imagine a righteousness
That defies expectation,
Perhaps not a righteousness of radical and shocking obedience
Like that of Abraham,
But a righteousness, perhaps,
Of radical welcome,
A righteousness of radical simplicity,
Perhaps no more than a cup of cold water
Offered in the name of Christ.

And a righteousness, perhaps,
Of radical doubt,
Radical questioning,
A radical encounter with the stories
And language and customs of our tradition.

And, perhaps, a radical dialogue
With the one who is becoming
Even as we are becoming.
How does God invite us into new ways of being?
How might we be inviting God
Into something new?

Together we encounter the past
And imagine a new future
And live together
In the unfolding promise
Of the eternal now.