

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
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Proper 8 Year A
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A pilgrimage to the Holy Land can illumine for us and bring us closer to the reality of the biblical culture found in our scriptures. This was true for me. The moment I eagerly descended the narrow stone staircase which led to the grotto in which Jesus lived while in Nazareth, I could suddenly imagine life in this community and all that which shaped Jesus in his thoughts, beliefs, and actions. My imagination was ignited by images of his large extended family - shopping in the markets, playing in the streets, cooking in the grottos, and carving out what little space they had to lay their sleeping mats upon the hard stone floor when nighttime fell. The same was true on an early morning excursion we took to soak in the beauty of the Judean desert and to celebrate the Great Thanksgiving in the place the Hebrew people would have traversed during their annual pilgrimage to the holy temple in Jerusalem. I understood why the Israelites got cranky in their exodus toward the promised land. The stark, brutal, yet beautiful desert went on as far as the eye could see, with no place of respite or relief from the beating sun. These were times when the reality of the landscape and culture of the ancient people transported my heart and soul to a whole new dimension of understanding of and connection to our faith stories.

And yet, there were times when the reality of the site paled in comparison with my preconceived image, as was the case with the Jordan River. I imagined it to be grand in expanse, extraordinary in its liveliness, and something to behold. It was an ordinary river, more like a creek one would find off the Chesapeake Bay. In those situations, when the reality was less than what I had imagined, I was called to find a different truth in something that seemed unfamiliar to me.

And then there were times when there was such a stark disconnect between the current reality of the site and the idyllic image I had brought with me, which shook me to the core. This happened most dramatically for me when we were in Bethlehem. I imagine we all have the same idyllic images of the site of Jesus' birth, partly because we know what happened there: The Prince of Peace was born. We may naturally expect it to be a place of unity, and beauty, a continuation of God's truth being born, again and again. It isn't any of that. It is a place where an ugly, massive wall has been constructed as a manifestation of the discord among the people who live there, of division which has been cast to reside there for a long time, a symbol of hatred of fellow sojourners on the way of expression of their faith.

A similar disparity between the current reality of Bethlehem and the site 2000 years ago shows up in our reading from Genesis today. The world we live into today shows little or no resemblance to the world of the author of this passage. The story of Abraham taking his son Isaac up the mountain, as per God's request, to be offered as a sacrifice is certainly confusing to our modern sensibilities and can be downright abhorrent to us based on the moral imperatives by which we strive to live our lives. There is much in this story we don't understand and we push up against.

For instance, why is Sarah not included in this story? This makes no sense for us who parent together, who wouldn't imagine making any major decision for our child, certainly not one where one's child's life would be at stake, without the consent of the other parent.

We wonder why Abraham is so silent, the same Abraham who advocated for Hagar and negotiated with God for the people of Sodom. Why, at this crucial moment when God asks this unreasonable act, would Abraham not argue? This makes no sense to us, because we Americans are very verbal and communicative, texting, calling, messaging, tweeting, all the time, plus we're grown used to arguing or bargaining with God.

God also seems to be redundant in his promise. Since he had already promised Abraham numerous progeny, why is this second test necessary to retain this promise? Abraham once left his homeland to follow God's lead, why must he prove his loyalty again? This makes no sense to us since we understand baptism to be, once and for all, turning over our lives to follow Jesus. We shouldn't need to do this again.

We balk at the notion that Abraham walks resolutely and without stumbling on his way to Mt. Moriah, when we find ourselves stumbling and tripping over so many obstacles, moral and theological.

The language of this passage is crisp and unwaveringly direct. We cry out for caveats, for escape hatches, for insertions into the text which would explain God's request. We hang onto the plural pronoun Abraham uses when he explains to the servants that "we will be returning" in hopes that this story will not end the way it seems set up to do.

Our hearts break when God explains to Abraham that Isaac is "your son, your only son, the one whom you love", while Abraham shares no emotion in the story.

We see the visual image of Abraham and Isaac trotting off together, in almost a Norman Rockwell painting, or in an old Andy Griffith show when Sheriff Taylor and his boy Opie are walking down the path at the start of each show, hand-in-hand, with fishing rods over their shoulders, whistling away, as they reach a favorite destination together, the town fishing hole. We read this story as a complete rupture of the relationship between father and son, one of which there could be no reparation. But that's not the image we get from the story.

And of course, we're confronted with an image of God we don't like, one we'd rather dismiss. Yet this piece of scripture and its location is the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, a center point of the Jewish and Muslim faiths.

There is high risk in including this story in the salvation narrative and particularly in putting it so early on, for you can imagine anyone in the 21st century, when the idea of sacrifice has long been forgotten, who starts reading the Bible from the beginning and fairly quickly gets to chapter 22, could slam the book shut and never open it again.

My experience is that, when a text pushes up against everything I want to believe about God, there is always an invitation to go deeper into the story, rather than following my impulse to rip that page out of the bible or close my heart to its message.

The story of God asking Abraham to offer his only and beloved son, Isaac, to be sacrificed as a test of his faith reveals the hard truth that salvation is going to be a costly endeavor. It sets the story of God and our salvation on a trajectory we often resist, namely that there are costs to being faithful. It is more comfortable to believe in a God who is predictable, tame and safe, than to believe in a God who actually demands something of us, who asks us to offer back to God that which is most precious to us, who promises us resurrection, but holds up the way of the cross to get there.

Abraham's test was not whether he would kill his son or not, but rather whether he could offer him back to God, and, in doing so, deepen his love for the giver of the gift of Isaac. God wanted to know if Abraham loved and cherished the gift given to him by God, his son, his only one, the one he loved, which would be a good and right thing, more than God himself, who gave him this gift. God wanted to know if Abraham was holding onto that gift to the exclusion of loving and being faithful to the giver. We can all love the gift and forget the giver; we can all love the life we have and forget God has given it us; we can all love the people in our lives and not give a moment's thought that they are a gift to us by God; we can all claim our successes as our own, without giving God any credit for them. When we acknowledge the source of all that we have, all that we are, all whom we love, as being God, transformation happens within, salvation unfolds in our lives, and our love of God deepens.

It seems cruel that God would expect us to offer back to God that which God has given, especially and particularly when it's something dear to us, for we need to be prepared for something dear to us to die, as a means of deepening our faith. It can be with pain and a sense of rupture, but it is often, don't you think, that it is in that fleeting moment when we allow ourselves to perceive the loss of that which is most dear to us, that we fall on our knees in gratitude that we had this at all in our lives, and a new faith is born from our gratitude. Crucifixion and resurrection, all in the one moment of offering to God that which we most love and hold dear, or what we believe most constitutes our identity.

We are invited to let things die so they can be reborn, with new purpose and imagination, and so that we can connect more deeply to our faithfulness in God. It is good and right that we have meaningful relationships, or that we have accumulated enough money to help us feel safe or that we have a job we love or that we're living the dream, but it's how tightly we hold onto it that matters, or how much we allow it to be our identity. If our hold is too tight, we lose track of God. Then we know it's time to offer it up, to place it on the altar, to allow God to receive and to give it back to us in a brand new way, which is more life-giving. There can be weeping when this happens. It can feel like your heart is being torn apart. Yet it is an invitation to step back and acknowledge the gift it has been to you and a time to fall more deeply in love with the God who gave this to you. A rebirth will emerge, one that promises to be good and holy.

God's instruction to Abraham was a wake-up call, inviting him not to prove his love of God, but to *claim* his love of God. There are times when I have similar conversations with you. I may call them "Come to Jesus conversations", when I raise the question, "What are you holding onto so tightly that you cannot give your life over to God?" Or I might ask the question, "Why do you think you are not asked to give up anything to follow God?" or "Why do you expect this to be easy?" or "Do you think God wants to wait forever for you to finally answer God's call to you?" If you wait too long, if you say no too many times, you may fall into the same pattern Abraham did of making unfaithful choices and falling out of relationship with the God who gave you life.

What do we need to place on the altar today? What do you resist handing back to God? It can be the blessings of your life, the people who add spark and love to your life, or it can be terrible things, like abuse you've suffered or chronic illness you endure, or pain of any kind. Put it there on the altar. Hand it back to God. Let it die. Then allow God to make it new and open the door to your renewed and abundant faith.

It is in the offering of that which is most precious to us, most cherished, that which we want to hold onto, or believe is our own, that the gift of loyalty and faith increase. I don't believe God asked Abraham to do this for God's sake. God didn't need this sacrifice to happen. God didn't want this sacrifice to happen. God wanted Abraham to claim his faithfulness. We can choose to dismiss the horror of this passage by either not paying attention to it at all, or by understanding, like we did with Hagar's expulsion last week, that God knew God was going to redeem this situation and in that is a good reminder that there is nothing in our lives beyond God's redemption. And that's a good, but not the most complete or faithful response. Because that response, of excusing the terror of the story because somehow God will redeem it for Abraham or for us when we're set in these situations, only involves our receiving something from God, not offering something. It's only half of the relationship. It was the act of Abraham's offering that matters to God, not God's redemption of the situation through the ram. It is through our offering of all that we are and all that we have, that we meet God at the altar. Let it be not only the bread that is broken apart today. Let it be your offering, broken open by God, to release new life. Amen.