

A sermon by Janet Lutz
First United Methodist Church of Evanston
4 Pentecost A July 2, 2017
Genesis 22:1-14
Matthew 10:40-42

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40 Those who receive you are also receiving me, and those who receive me are receiving the one who sent me. 41 Those who receive a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet's reward. Those who receive a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward. 42 I assure you that everybody who gives even a cup of cold water to these little ones because they are my disciples will certainly be rewarded. (CEB)

Hear what the Spirit says to the Church

So here you are on this lovely Sunday morning in July, enjoying the weather, and hoping to hear a not too disturbing sermon—a little Christian lite isn't all bad.

And what do you get? One of the most troubling stories in the Old Testament.

She sat dozing in the sun, wondering where her husband and beloved son had gone. Her son was nearly a man, and her husband was very old, well, of course, so was she. She hoped her son did not wear out his father with his energy and youth—and his endless questions.

As he climbed the mountain with his father, he had endless questions, but got no answers, except, "I'm here". Why were they carrying enough wood to light the mountain on fire, and where were they going anyway? And really had he forgotten the lamb for the sacrifice? Was he getting forgetful in his old age?

They'd been gone a long time and she felt this tiny flicker of worry. What were they doing? They'd left, saying nothing.

His father told their escort to wait at the base of the mountain, so now he had to carry all the wood by himself. What the heck was going on? And why wouldn't the old man talk to him? And where was that lamb?

This is the beginning of a terrifying story in the Old Testament. What on earth did God intend by telling Abraham to go to the mountain with his son—the very son who, it was promised, would establish the nations.

What are we to make of it, and what does it have to say to us today? Let me say up front that this is a really difficult story, even though it is one of the most familiar stories in the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim traditions. In fact, the Dome of the Rock, near the Western Wall in old Jerusalem, one of the holiest places in the world for Muslims, is said to be built on Mt. Moriah, where this event takes place

As Christians, Muslims, or Jews, we all keep coming back to this story because it is confusing, troubling, and touches on something very deep in us. It is a moral dilemma: as the CEB says in a sidebar: “God allows an animal to be sacrificed in place of Isaac but also praises Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac.”¹ What is that?

Rabbis, biblical scholars, Sunday School Classes, preachers have all wrestled with this story. What is this God here? How can Abraham do this? Why didn’t he argue with God over this? Why was Isaac so passive, and how come Sarah was left out of this story? So what are we to make of this, and what are we to make of God in this story?

Let me tell you a few things I think are here: It is a story about the depth of Abraham’s faith (which God never questions); it is a story about the evils of child sacrifice. (One way this story has been understood is that this is God’s way of saying, no more human sacrifice. Many of the other religions around practiced human sacrifice as a way of appeasing the gods.)

It can also be seen to be about the child’s ultimate obedience to his parent. It is even a story about an abusive god who manipulates Abraham to prove something to Godself. I think all of those things are in this story, but none of them are the central message of this story.

One thing I noticed in reading about this story is that in some sense this is about the strength and perseverance of Isaac. He not only survived this horrific event, but he went on to become a pillar of the faith, and one of the patriarchs of the Hebrews.

However, the story does not tell us how it was that Abraham got Isaac on that altar, buried under all the wood. Did Isaac submit to Abraham’s command, did he wonder if his father was getting daft in his old age, did he assume that there would be a lamb? And at what point do you think he finally realized what Abraham had in mind? Was it when Abraham bound him

¹ CEB, page 37

hand and foot? Was it when Abraham raised his knife? Did he panic, did he scream, did he cry? Scholars think he was about 17; did he think of his hopes and dreams?

At the end of the story, Abraham goes down the mountain alone. Isaac leaves for another city, never lives with Abraham and Sarah again, and never has a conversation with Abraham again in Genesis. Abraham does not have another conversation with God, and in the next chapter of Genesis, Sarah dies. This event seems to have traumatized and broken this family.

We often see God as unchanging, all knowing.

This is a story that points to a different way of seeing God. Perhaps God made a mistake, perhaps God had second thoughts about what God had ordered. Perhaps this God is growing and God's people are growing in their understanding of each another.

In this terrible story God moves from a demanding God—go up to the mountain, sacrifice the son of your old age, to a merciful God—stop! Here is the ram for sacrifice. Unfortunately this God only addresses Abraham, and does not communicate with Isaac, lying bound under all that wood.

This story about Abraham was told long before it was written down 800 BCE. In the telling, I am sure many things got changed as the stories were told, first around the fire at night, then in the Temple, then in places of worship. We do not, and cannot know what really happened. Or if it really happened. What we do know is that it is a story that was remembered for centuries, perhaps millennia, before someone decided to write it down. Yet it had power, the power to challenge our easy notions of God. It has power to stop us in our tracks and say, what kind of God is this?

If God changes in this story, is God still changing? Does God interact in our world and change in God's own way? What has God to say to us? Some think the only things God really have to say to us have been written down in the ancient texts. I say that is not true. God continues to grow as do we. We Methodists have had to learn a lot of things over the years of our existence. We have had to learn that slavery was evil, and splitting the church over it was a sin. We have had to learn that our sexuality, whatever its expression, is a gift, and not a burden. And we are still trying to learn that we can all live under the tent of Methodism, and homosexuality is certainly not something to split the church over. We are all God's people.

What that means, I think, is that if we are truly in the image of God, and we are expected to change, and grow, and move forward, wouldn't God do the same thing? In this story, God's mind seems to be changed. Perhaps, God wanted to see how far Abraham would go in his commitment to God, or perhaps God wanted to know Abraham's heart. And then God sends a messenger, to tell Abraham what to do. God does not show up. Was God embarrassed?

It's risky to attribute all these human characteristics to God, yet there they are. God is a God of mercy. And the merciful God showed up for Abraham.

What, in your life, has forced you to make a decision between some not so very good options? What did you decide? At the end of seminary I had what seemed to me some not so good options. It was 1969, and there were not too many places available. I was offered two positions: one as a live in housemother at a children's home, and one as a chaplain at a nursing home. Or I had the option to teach third grade at a private school unconnected with the church. I was 24. I chose teaching because the two places for ministry seemed suffocating and not where I thought God was calling me to be. I didn't know exactly where that was, and it took another 3 or 4 years for that to become clearer. I wrestled with God a lot in those days—what do you want me to do? Please will you, God, or someone, just tell me what to do? There didn't seem to be many places for a woman in ministry—certainly not this woman in ministry. I wonder if God was wrestling with me. Those years were full of great restlessness for me. Where was I going and what was I going to do? I made a number of bad decisions, none of which worked out. And after about 5 years, I decided to stop teaching and actually do ministry—in some form. As a way of getting back into ministry, I signed up to be an intern in chaplaincy at the old Children's Memorial Hospital. I walked into that hospital, and I knew I had come home. This is what I had been looking for—I belonged here—and I stayed in hospital chaplaincy for most of the next 30 years. There were a number of hospitals along the way. This is where I found a home in ministry.

I think God wrestled with me, and I with God. I have lots of questions of God. Why this, why that--

Which brings me to the passage from Matthew that I read earlier, where Jesus continues to tell his disciples what to expect and do as he sends them out:

Those who receive you are also receiving me, and those who receive me are receiving the one who sent me . . . I assure you that everybody who gives even a cup of cold water to

these little ones because they are my disciples will certainly be rewarded. (CEB Mt 10:40-42)

In a world where people are attacked in their own homes, answering a doorbell becomes an act of faithfulness. Offering directions to a lost traveler provokes second thoughts. Holding another's hand involves body contact. Visiting the hospital or retirement home means an encounter with the sick, the dying, and the lonely. Mumbling hello to a stranger on a crowded street may seem odd. A little airplane flight to visit friends can be nerve-racking; a bomb may be aboard, a sky marshal and terrorist may re-enact the old west down the center aisle. When much of the world's population does not have clean drinking water, accepting an outstretched cup becomes a matter of courage.² When loving someone who is seen as "different" from me is questioned, loving is courageous. In this kind of world, a world of walls and barriers, violence and loneliness, Christian hospitality becomes a prophetic act.

And Jesus says to do this. Reach out. The world is frightening beyond our walls. Our neighbors are scary. Our neighbors are hungry—for food and more than food.

From a Rabbi

"Everything we have is a gift. This is true not only of our possessions. The people we love and even our own lives don't belong to us. They are merely lent to us for our brief enjoyment. If you think everything is due you, your life will be filled with the bitterness of frustrated expectations. If you live without expectations, and see what comes your way as a gift, it's much easier to be happy. Observant Jews often write a line from Psalms in the inside cover of their books: 'The world in all its fullness belongs to God. This book is in my temporary possession.'³"

Welcome, touch, be vulnerable to one another, make peace. Face to face, hand to hand, person to person.

The ancient Abraham gave what God asked of him.

What more could God ask of us than to keep our cups full in case someone gets thirsty? And to take what is offered.

² Craig T. Kocher. "Risk Business" (lectionary meditation)

³ Reference unknown.

In other words, trust the hospitality that is offered, even something as simple as a cup of cool water. Or a ram in the bushes.

Benediction

And I tell you:

That God is in our future calling us

That God is in our past forgiving us

That God is in the present loving us

There is no greater blessing

Go in peace. Amen⁴

⁴ Ruth Duck. Touch Holiness, page 241