

The Chapel of St. James the Fisherman

Proper 8, Year A: Genesis 22:1-14; Psalm 13; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42

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In all of our faith traditions, there is some *thing* that we don't question. In a Northeastern congregation, it's a safe bet there are a few former or practicing Roman Catholics here every Sunday, and I'd guess that in that tradition, you don't question the authority of the Church itself: its teachings, its clergy, its traditions. In the Episcopal Church, it's harder to name our sacred cows. For some folks, you don't mess with The Book of Common Prayer (or, more accurately, "the rubrics"). Traditional language is untouchable for some. But more likely it's the notion that we represent a *via media*, or "middle way," that we come down hard on, this idea that a range of Christian beliefs and experiences can find a home in the Anglican ethos. In which case it would be our openness that we tend to get rigid about. You can see the bumper sticker now: "Question everything—but don't question our flexibility!"

Now, I did not grow up in the Episcopal Church, or the Roman Catholic Church. Like a lot of my parishioners in Birmingham, I grew up in an Evangelical tradition. And even if you don't know a lot of Evangelicals, I bet you can guess what symbol of authority *we* did not question ... The Bible. We read Scripture with utter seriousness, gravity, and respect; but also with the same literalism, anxiety, and *fear* that some judges bring to constitutional interpretation. Where the Bible was concerned there was no freedom to wonder. No exploration of the emotional world of the characters we met in Scripture; no extrapolating from a story to its possible outcomes or consequences, or questioning what might have happened had things gone another way. No art. No story. No imagination.

So it was a great relief to me as a young adult, and as a student of religion, to discover that this is not how our forebears in the *Jewish* faith tradition approached our shared sacred texts *at all*. Though rabbinical interpretation of Scripture is as varied as Christian approaches, among the methods used is one called Midrash, where new stories and new scenarios are imagined in order to connect the "the unchanging biblical text" to the changing lives of faithful people. And while this approach is in keeping with the dynamism of Scripture; while it allows ethical and moral direction to emerge organically from the text; it *also* gives us a way in and through stories that puzzle us ... and terrify us. It is, therefore, out of this living attitude toward the Bible, that we get a traditional riddle today: "Why did God not send an angel to tell Abraham to sacrifice his child?" And its answer: "Because God knew that no angel would take on such a task. Instead, the angels said, 'If you want to command death, do it yourself.'" And also this, a poignant dialogue between God and his chosen patriarch: "God said, 'Take your son.' And Abraham said, 'I have two sons.' God answered him, 'Your only son.' Abraham said to Him, 'Each is the only son of his mother.' God said, 'The one whom you love.' Abraham replied, 'Is there any limit to a father's love?' And God answered, 'Isaac.'"

While there is no shortage of troubling stories in the Bible, few are so deeply unsettling, as the angels and Abraham himself apparently knew, as the one we hear today about the young man, Isaac; his father, Abraham; their God; and this command. And yet, despite the fact that it is such a difficult account for us and all who have come before us to hear, the *akedah*, as it is known in

Hebrew, is foundational for both Judaism and Christianity. Moriah, the mountain where Abraham is willing to offer his son and where God spares Isaac's life, is where the temple was built and temple worship, particularly liturgies of penitence, invoke the *akedah*, asking God to remember both Abraham's merit, God's mercy toward Isaac, and God's provision in supplying the ram. For similar reasons, the *akedah* has its place in Christian worship. It is one of the long, majestic readings we offer during the Great Vigil of Easter, while we watch and wait by candlelight to learn once more that Christ has defeated death. For, not surprisingly, we discern in Isaac the shape of God's own son, Jesus. And a darker history underlies all human relationships to this story, for many scholars propose that it represents not only a telling of what happened between one father and one son, but also a decisive shift in ritual practice for the emerging people of God, who had come to discern that this deity desired a sacrifice of love and fidelity—and not one's firstborn child.

This latter development, of course, is reassuring. And the liturgical and theological importance we attach to the *akedah* is rich. Yet no exposition of this text's religious significance makes it a less restless story or gives us any more peace when we consider the issues that it raises up, and refuses to put down. We are, first of all, concerned about Isaac. He may actually be a young adult, rather than a child; his faith may be as firm as his father's, and appears to be so; his being *was spared* . . . but Moriah *must* have been present to Isaac every day of his life. The Anglican author Madeline L'Engle imagines this for him in her poem, "Isaac," which begins with this line: "From now on, no Fathers are to be trusted." We are concerned about the son. And we are concerned about the command, why God would test Abraham at all, or again, from the poem, in Isaac's voice: "Why ask? Why demand obedience for such a wanton sacrifice? How can my father's Father be a God of love?" We wonder about God's command. But over and over, as we search the literature surrounding this literature, the ages and ages of teachers and writers and painters and singers who have done their best midrash on this story, Isaac's final question emerges for us as often as any other, "How could my father sharpen the knife?" Why didn't Abraham put up a fight?

We know what Abraham would have said, and did say: "The Lord will provide." And the dramatic beauty of his personal story is that it is only at this point, after all of his missteps and second-guessing, all of his attempts to make his own way and save his own skin—at this point when *God* is most uncertain about whether God has staked his relationship with humanity on the right family—it is *at this point*, when everything Abraham loves is on the line . . . that he finally gets it, and is able to respond obediently in a way that no hearer in any generation could ever imagine doing. And *therein* is the dramatic *genius* of this story—its divine inspiration. For Abraham's preposterous faith never satisfies and always forces the most important question *for faith* for every person who encounters it. And that question is not *why are you doing this?* But *how are you believing this?* Or more precisely, *how do you know that what God has promised you is true?*

And so this is where our own midrash begins: where our changing stories connect to the unchanging and inexhaustible stories of the Bible. Each one of us could go home today, make a silent place for prayer, and ask the Spirit, "where in my life am I wondering if God's promises are true for me? Where in my *past* have I wondered about these things?" This would be an examen worth doing often and regularly in one's spiritual journey. But truthfully, most of us

don't feel like we've been promised anything as prescribed as Abraham was. For us, I think, the promises are not that a particular thing will happen in my life, but that my life has a particular meaning—that I am being led in a direction that I can trust. When I ask myself, "How do I know that God's promises are true?" I am thinking about the promises these missionaries Jesus is sending out today are hoping in, that God is with us wherever we go. I am thinking about the promises that St. Paul, almost every Sunday in worship, is driving into our consciousness, that we really are part of Christ; that he joins us to God; and that Jesus gives us power to live a totally new kind of life. I am thinking about those Easter Vigil promises that follow on the heels of the *akedah*, where bells ring and angels sing, and against all evidence to the contrary we proclaim that dead things live, and our God has been revealed to be the God of life.

The Bible has given you this question, the question about God's promises, as a gift. Because faith, obedience, love do not consist in protecting, fearing, or even answering this question but in never letting it go. If this were not true, God would not have given us a story like Isaac's to stir up faith—to keep faith alive. God would not have given us salvation as a story to tell each other from age to age as we offer our own souls and bodies at the altar. And God would not have given your life to you as a story that finds its interpretation in his.