“You Want Me to Do *What*, God?

3rd Sunday after Pentecost, June 25, 2017, Year A

Genesis 21:1-7; 22:1-12

First Congregational Church, UCC, Saugus, Massachusetts

Rev. Martha Leahy

When we were kids, my brother and sisters used to play this game. We would pose challenging questions to each other, which forced us to make one of two impossible choices in dire situations. For example:

“If Mom and Dad were drowning and you could only save one, which would one would you save?”

“If our house was burning down and you could save only one of us kids, which one would you save?”

“If you could be born blind or deaf, which would you choose?”

“If you could bring back from the dead one person, which one would it be?”

Weren’t we charming children? Actually, we were pretty typical. As adults, we forget how deeply kids think and how boldly they ask the questions about life and death that we shy away from. These are the kinds of deadly dilemmas most people don’t want to think about never mind talk about.

The story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham is one few people want to talk about. It’s not the passage that’s normally voted “most likely to leave us with an uplifting feeling about God on a Sunday morning”. On hearing this story, our child-selves may have translated it as, “If God told you to kill someone, would you do it?”

The only redeeming part of the story is that it is a *near*-sacrifice, not a fully-acted-upon sacrifice. Isaac lives and Abraham’s achievement of fatherhood at age 100 is not brought to a tragic end.

But why *would* God demand such a cruel thing of Abraham? Many scholars try to figure out the reason God does this. One theory says the story is a precursor to the death of Jesus, God’s son, whom God sacrificed for us. Another says it is a warning to Abraham’s tribe that the sacrifice of children in the tribal religion – common in those days – is not acceptable to God: God prevents Abraham from killing his son and the whole tribe should learn from then on, that God will not be pleased if they continue doing it. Another theory says that Abraham misunderstood God and God stepped in at the last minute to stop the tragedy from happening.

Perhaps all this could have been straightened out beforehand if Abraham had only said, “You want me to do *what*, God?”

In Anne Tyler’s book, *Saint Maybe*, a teenage girl protests about being forced to go to church and complains about all the Bible stories she has problems with. One of them, she says is, “…Abraham and Isaac. That one really ticks me off. God asks Abraham to kill his own son. And Abraham says, ‘Okay.’ Can you believe it? And then at the very last minute God says, ‘Only testing. Ha-ha.’ Boy, I’d like to know what Isaac thought. All the rest of his life, any time his father so much as looked in his direction Isaac would think ---.” At this point her speech is cut off by a concerned relative, at a loss as to how to explain the redeeming value of this story, if there is any.

What *did* Isaac think? What *did* he think about his father after he seemed ready to kill him? What *did* he think of this new God who had been speaking to his father and mother, who told them to leave home and travel to an unknown place, who allowed his 90-year-old mother to become pregnant and give birth to him? This is a lot for a young person to take in, but now Isaac must wonder: have *we all* been taken in by this very strange and powerful God?

A current-day Episcopal priest, Fr. Allen Pruitt, writes that he is most disturbed, not by the fact that Abraham was ready to die for his faith, but that he was ready to kill for it. He goes on, “In the years after this incident, we hear very little from Isaac. In fact, the story does not make clear that Isaac came back with his father. An old Jewish Midrash claims that Abraham came back down the mountain on one side and Isaac went down the other side, never again speaking to his father, the one who had shattered his trust,” (Pruitt).

Why would a father blindly obey a God he had *never seen* and kill a son he had *finally seen* after waiting 99 years? The first verse in this story says, “Sometime later, God tested Abraham.” Tested for *what* is not clear. Would God set before any of *us* such an impossible choice: to kill our own child or face some vague consequences? What exactly would have been the consequence of Abraham just saying, “No?”

Some writers mark the similarity between Abraham’s choice and our culture sending our children off to fight in a war. What choice do we really have? Send the child to war and risk losing them, or lose them to the prison system for draft dodging? Both options tear at our heartstrings and both leave us feeling powerless. Really, that’s how Abraham would have wound up if God had allowed him to go through with this terrible test - scarred either way.

It’s certain many of us have faced a crucial test of this kind. It could be the choice to carry a baby with profound birth defects to full term or to have an abortion. It could be whether to keep a dying parent or spouse breathing on mechanical life support or whether to allow them to die a natural, though difficult, death. It could be whether to show tough love to a drug-addicted child, asking them to leave our home because we just cannot figure out how to help them without hurting the rest of the family.

These are tough tests of our human relationships and our relationship with God. Do *we* feel God helps us through times of trial or throws them at us just to see how tough we are? Who is God to us? And, maybe just as important, who do we think we are to God – test crash dummies or true companions in life and faith?

Fr. Allen Pruitt concludes, “What if Abraham’s test was just that: a real test? And what if, for centuries, we have been wrong in assuming that Abraham passed the test? What if the real test was whether Abraham was willing to stand up, like a real father, for himself and for his family and say ‘NO!...I think Abraham failed his test and God did what God *always* does. God redeemed Abraham and sent him on his way, promise intact.” (Pruitt).

Most of the modern theologians I’ve read this week agree with Pruitt. This is a terrible story that Christians rarely preach on. In fact, the resources I use for inspiration skip this passage altogether. But I decided to jump into the text *because* I didn’t like it. And I knew *you* might not like it, either. I feel sometimes we just have to face these really hard stories in the Bible and try to figure them out.

But if there is one thing that redeems this story is what Pruitt hits on. I think Abraham failed God’s test, and God had to step in. But God didn’t punish Abraham; God *forgave* Abraham’s decision to go through with the deadly ritual and continued to support and encourage Abraham for the rest of his life.

I would say that is the biggest insight I gained from this story: that God knows we have tough choices to make – choices in no-win situations – and God will be there to support us, whatever choice we make. God is our eternal hope. God’s love light for us never goes out. We are never alone because our God won’t allow it. Sometimes it may feel we are the only people on God’s Earth who are suffering in this particular way but, be assured, we have plenty of company. When all looks lost, God will always find a way through our pain. God loves us, as God loved Abraham, Sarah and Isaac.

The world of children is a complex one. Children think deeply and ask questions almost impossible to answer. Where does their insight come from? How do their young minds come up with this stuff?

A simple answer is that human beings were born with the desire to look for answers to puzzling questions. Archeologists have found evidence that the very first intellectual impulse of early humans was to believe in a Higher Power than they which held the secrets of life and death. Cave paintings, ancient altars and ritual objects all point to the reverence of early humans for a Being or Deity that caused unexplainable things to happen.

Now we know a lot about scientific facts and research that shows the evolution of our relationship to the God of Abraham’s clan and ours. There is no need to shy away from the hard questions of life because God gave us the intellect and curiosity to seek answers for ourselves that will help us make sense of the world.

You want us to do *what*, God? Okay, yes, we will continue to seek you and follow where any and all signs lead us. And we are sure that you will help us find the answers we are seeking. Thanks be to God. Amen.

References

“Akedah,” Jewish Virtual Library, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/akedah>.

Holladay, William L., *Long Ago God Spoke: How Christians May Hear the Old Test*ament Today (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 56-57; 105-106; 113-114.

*The Jewish Study Bible, Tanakh Translation* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004, 45-46.

“Dome of the Rock,” Places of Peace and Power, <https://sacredsites.com/middle_east/israel/dome_of_the_rock.html>

Pruitt, Allen, “The Binding of Isaac,” June 26, 2011;

<https://allenpruitt.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/proper8a11speechform.pdf>

Tyler, Ann, *Saint Maybe* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 198.

*Zondervan NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).