

The story of Abraham offering his son Isaac as a sacrifice is one of the most powerful in all of Hebrew scripture. It has been represented in art by masters like Rembrandt; and it has been the subject of great literary and theological works, like Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*.

When we first hear or read this story, it is impossible not to have a reaction. We may be perplexed and wonder what God is thinking. We may become angry and see God as cruel, playing with a father's emotions and with an innocent boy. We may try to explain the unexplainable and see this as part of God's mysterious plan. How do you react?

I believe it is important to sit with this story, revisiting it over a lifetime, and let it affect us in all the different ways it can, depending on where we are in our life's journey. But for us to do that, it is necessary to better understand Abraham's journey. You see this one event, the binding of Isaac, as extraordinary as it is, is part of a greater story. Knowing that full story may help us as we sit and learn from this fearful event so that it may help us on our journey of faith.

The story of Abraham begins in the twelfth chapter of Genesis (it would be good homework for you to go back and read from Genesis 12 to today's passage to learn or remember his entire story). Some of the highlights of Abraham's story are in the recesses of our shared faith memories from Sunday school, the liturgy, sermons, and our own reading and study. Let me give you some of the highlights that bring us to the story we heard today.

First, Abraham was a man who encountered God in a profound way. He was called by God to leave his family, his homeland, and begin a journey with just his immediate household. And in that encounter with God, that calling, God promised Abraham that he would be blessed—and that he would be a blessing to others, even to all the families of earth. Abraham and his faith are unique in the history of humanity. Three great religions and over two billion people today trace their faith to this figure.

Second, Abraham was a man with serious flaws. His faith did not make him morally perfect. He was willing to do what was needed to get by and even to thrive in the world in which he lived. So on two different occasions, Abraham deceived powerful kings about the status of his relationship with his wife (who was also his half-sister). You see, Abraham was worried that as he journeyed in the kingdoms of Egypt and Philistia, that because of her beauty, a king would kill Abraham to get Sarah. So instead of claiming Sarah as his wife, he half-lied and said she was his sister. In both cases, the situation turned out better than deserved for

Abraham. But if you were one of the kings (or Sarah)—you would undoubtedly see the flaws in this “friend of God.”

Abraham’s moral ambiguity is also revealed in how he let Sarah treat Hagar and Ishmael, banishing them because she felt jealous of these rivals to her and her son, Isaac. As we hear both versions of this family exile, it is hard not to wonder about Abraham and the way he abandoned Hagar and Ishmael, despite the way that God intervened and saved them.

Third, Abraham was a man existing in that tension between great faith and great flaws, revealing his character to face hard challenges and his ability to get things done. We see this when his nephew Lot and his family got stuck in the middle of a conflict between tribes and were kidnapped by an ancient Boko Haram-like group. Abraham showed skills and courage as he pursued the bad guys and got back his family. Abraham could pray and trust God—but he could also come up with a strategy and execute it bravely in order to save people in peril.

Fourth, Abraham did practice his faith despite his personal flaws. So for example, we’re told how he and Sarah showed extreme hospitality to three strangers and in that generous act, discovered that they were entertaining angels of the Lord. It was in the context of this meal that the Lord reinforced again the promise of the blessing of a child for Abraham and Sarah despite the harsh reality of their age. In fact in a homey detail, we’re told that Sarah laughed behind the scenes when she heard this promise of a child at their age; and then she denied laughing when she was asked about it by the Lord. You can almost see the Lord smile as we’re told he said, “No, you laughed.”

Right after this meal, Abraham combined his faith and character-- and more than a little chutzpah-- as he negotiated with the Lord over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. You see these cities were so filled with injustice and abuse of the poor and strangers that the Lord’s anger was raised against them and he was threatening to wipe them out. The Lord let Abraham in on the divine plan of destruction. Perhaps because of his cousin Lot who lived there; or perhaps because of some deeper compassion, Abraham tried to save these unjust cities by asking the Lord how many righteous people were required to live in a city in order to get the Lord to change his mind. For the record, Abraham got the deal down to ten righteous people.

So these stories reveal that Abraham was a complex man. And Abraham believed in a complex God. You see, this is not just a one sided story. We learn about God as we learn about Abraham, like the story of the negotiation over Sodom. One strange story about God and Abraham also involved another story of sacrifice. In Genesis 15, God made a covenant with Abraham. As is common in the ancient world when covenants were made, there was a sacrifice involved. In this story, Abraham prepared the sacrificial animals and then God, represented by a

fiery, smoking lamp, passed through the sacrifice on the altar. So before God ever asked Abraham to put Isaac on the altar, first God was part of a sacrifice on an altar.

In today's story, God asked this complex man, Abraham, to join him at an altar as part of a sacrifice—and to bring his son, Isaac, too. You see, God knew Abraham when he called him. God knew him through his life: his deep faith and courage; his flaws and moral ambiguity; his great joy and gratitude at God's blessings toward him, especially the miracle of his son Isaac. And God wanted Abraham—all of him, including his promised son—to join God at the altar as part of a living sacrifice where God had gone before.

Now some of the details of the story of God and Abraham and Isaac are strange. The thought of human sacrifice or child abuse is horrific—but those aspects are not to be taken literally. Even when the story was first told, the hearers knew that the point was about something more. And as you re-read the details, look for the aspects that point to that something more—Isaac's voice was heard as he questioned his father; Abraham replied to him tenderly; and Abraham expressed trust that God would provide and that despite the scary ordeal, the boy would return alive with his father.

This whole story of Abraham is a story of a complex man and a complex God who both made a sacrifice that joined them together in an inseparable way. No matter Abraham's flaws—or even God's flaws, at least from our perspective—God and Abraham were joined together to continue the journey with a common purpose—for Abraham to be a blessing to all the people of the world, no matter what he and his descendants would face.

Now this story of Abraham is a big story—so big it may be hard for many of us to relate to it. But it is worth asking-- Where am I on my journey with God? Who am I as I walk along in life? Most of us are complex like Abraham. We face tough choices on how to get along in life—when to cheat, just a little (or a lot); when to take courageous action against people who do wrong; when to show chutzpah toward the powerful (even questioning God or how the powerful interpret God). We have had encounters with God and many of us have had a sense of calling—what God wants us to do with our lives. So Abraham and his story resonate with many of us. The question of faith for us is how—or on whom-- do we center our lives? How do we live faithfully through the complexity of life?

The story of Abraham gives us an answer-- God called Abraham to join him at the altar as a sacrifice. And through the gospel of Jesus, God calls us today to come to an altar, too. God calls us to join God in the sacrifice of our lives; or as Jesus proclaimed, to take up our cross and follow Him. We can take all the complexity of our lives—our faith, our courage, our flaws, and our gifts—and bring them to the altar of God and entrust them to God's promise to be with us and bless us and to bless all the people of the earth through us.

Today we obey that call of God as we share in our sacrifice of thanksgiving and come to the altar to receive the sacrifice of God in Holy Communion. We obey that call as we go out into the world and trust in God and God's promise as we encounter God in all of life's complexities. And day by day, week by week, we obey God's call as we reconnect with God in the living sacrifice of our lives.

Amen.