

Pentecost 7 - Year A
29 June 2008
Saint Anne's Episcopal Church
Lee's Summit, Missouri

Genesis 22:1-14

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful people and kindle in them the fire of your love.
AMEN.

If last week's reading from the Hebrew scriptures – the story of Hagar and Ishmael cast out of Abraham and Sarah's household into the desert – was difficult – it's almost as if the author of the Book of Genesis should have written a little note between that story and the one we heard today. And that little note should have prepared us to get ready. I think it might have said, “you ain't heard nothin' yet.”

This is an incredibly difficult and in many ways a puzzling story. It is among the best known and most theologically demanding in the Abraham tradition – indeed perhaps in our entire Judeo-Christian tradition.

This story is the basis for hundreds, if not thousands, of pieces of art and literature. The story – as difficult as it is – has captivated people for generations. Drawn them in to dark and chilling strangeness.

And maybe we are drawn to this story because it is so very difficult – so difficult to read and so difficult to interpret.

I was drawn to this text as I began working on a sermon for today. Compared to the other texts which were possibilities in the lectionary readings, this is the one that grabbed me, that drew me in. And, by the end of the week, as Sunday approached, I wondered if I had really made a good choice, listened to the right message, because I was struggling so mightily with it. It felt like the story and I were wrestling...and the story was winning!

It is a story that is sometimes known as the “Testing of Abraham,” but more often by its Hebrew name – “the Aqedah,” that is, the binding of Isaac.

Abraham - as we heard last Sunday - had already sent one son, his firstborn Ishmael and Ishmael's mother Hagar, into the desert at his wife Sarah's urging. Now, Abraham had been told by God to take his second son Isaac, the only son he had left, the son of God's promise, the son he and Sarah had waited decades for, the son he loved, the son who would be the first of descendants more numerous than the stars in the sky - to take his son Isaac to Mount Moriah – a three day's journey away - and there to sacrifice him as a burnt offering. To give what he loved most, the fulfillment of all his hopes and dreams for the future, and to give it to God in a religious act, an act of faith.

It's almost too much to imagine, isn't it? If we hadn't heard this story so many times, if we didn't know the ending, we'd probably have to catch our breath for just a moment before we could read on, wouldn't we?

But, Abraham didn't argue; he didn't question. He just did as he was commanded by God.

So, Abraham and Isaac, along with two servants, headed out to Mount Moriah early the very next day. On the way to Mount Moriah, Abraham cut some wood for the sacrificial fire, left the servants behind, and piled the wood for the fire on Isaac's back; then, father and son went on.

Now, Isaac was old enough and smart enough to know that something was missing from this picture. He knew he was carrying the wood. Okay. Check. His father was carrying the fire and the knife. Okay. Check. Hey, wait a minute, we're forgetting something here, and it's pretty important. "Dad, where's the lamb for the burnt offering?"

And the old man answered, "**God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.**"

So, on they went. And, in a scene that I can't even imagine no matter how hard I try, Abraham built an altar, took the wood off his son Isaac's back, arranged the wood on the altar, then put Isaac on top of the wood on the altar, and bound him there.

We aren't told whether Isaac argued with what his father was doing to him or cried out or fought back or willingly laid himself on the altar. But, there he was - tied to the wood on an altar, put there by his own dad.

If Isaac was still able to keep his eyes open and to look at his father, if his eyes weren't shut in fear or filled with tears, he saw his father, the one who he knew loved him deeply, about to do the unthinkable – because Abraham had his knife in his hand, right over his boy Isaac, ready to make him the sacrifice on that altar. But, then the story tells us that suddenly an angel sent from God broke in and stopped the action right there.

Abraham! Abraham! Do not lay a hand on the boy!

And, Abraham looked over into a thicket and – sure enough – what he had told Isaac earlier had come to pass. God had provided a sacrifice – a ram - for the altar that day, just as Abraham had told Isaac God would do.

Abraham's faith and trust in God had been validated. God's test of Abraham had been passed.

And, Abraham called that place “the Lord will provide.”

It is a captivating story, isn't it? It's an ancient story that still draws us in, doesn't it?

But, what are we to make of it? What does this ancient Near Eastern story have to say to us modern, middle class, American Christians?

Well, that's what I've been struggling with all week. Where is the “word of the Lord” in this story for us today?

How can I possibly explain a God who would promise life and yet command death? A God who began his relationship with Abraham with a promise that his son Isaac would be the first of descendants too numerous to count, and a God that would command that Isaac must be killed – sending the promise back to barrenness and nothingness.

How can I explain a God who is both tester and provider?

Now perhaps you can see why I've been struggling. By week's end, no matter how I turned this story upside down and inside out, no matter how many commentaries and articles I read, no matter how much I wanted to make this story say what I wanted it to say - I had to admit that I couldn't figure this story out.

I can't explain this story and make the harsh edges and the seeming contradictions go away.

And, then, when I made that admission, I had come face-to-face with a reality that I know in my head but have such a hard time accepting and living. It is the reality that "God is God." It's what my priest mentor in Austin used to say all the time, "God is God, and I'm not."

It was the same reality that Abraham had to face on that trip up Mount Moriah.

It is the reality that the wandering children of Israel faced when they heard God's voice say, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me." "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone."

It is the same reality that Noah faced as he built an ark to prepare for the great flood.

It is the same reality behind Jesus' great prayer – Give us sustenance for the day. Rescue us from the evil one. Do not bring us into the time of trial.

God is God. The God who delivers, the God who provides, is also the God who prohibits any alternative god, who will not allow any alternative trust.

God is God. The God who is graciously faithful in giving good gifts is also freely sovereign and requires complete obedience. And, God's testing is a disclosure of God's free sovereignty and requirement for obedience.

I don't know about you, but I want a God who provides, a God who delivers, a God who gives good gifts. I feel comfortable with that kind of God. I really like that kind of God.

But, I feel a lot more nervous about a God who requires complete obedience – a God who tests. And, let me confess it right now, complete obedience, testing – my discomfort with that is why I think I struggled with this text.

But we don't get to pick and choose which parts of God we want to deal with. We don't get to make God reasonable and explainable by our standards.

God is God, and we can't get part of God without all of God. God is graciously faithful and God is freely sovereign.

That understanding, that recognition is what can allow us to hold together both God's dark command on Mount Moriah and God's provision and faithfulness to the promise on the very same mountain.

That doesn't explain it, of course, because no human reason or logic can explain it.

There will always be a tension in the contradiction of this sovereign, faithful God. The God who commands, and the God who provides. The God who allows no other gods, and the God who delivers God's people.

But, it's not about explanation – as hard as I had tried to make it about explanation. It's about faith – that readiness to say “yes” to God's command just as readily as to say “yes” to God's promise. To allow God to be both sovereign and provider, and not to have to figure out how that works. To let God be God and not make God fit my human capacities to understand and explain.

So, that's where my struggle has come to this week. I cannot rationally explain this story of Abraham and his son Isaac on Mount Moriah. There is no rational, human explanation. But, there is a faithful response – God is God.

God is God and our response – with all our rational questions – is faith, just as Father Abraham's response was faith. Not blind faith, but faith in this sovereign provider who is God.

AMEN.