

What Kind of God?

Genesis 22:1-14
Matthew 10:40-42

Crossroads Christian Church
June 29, 2014 Pentecost 3A

I need to be honest about something going in. I went to the lectionary and read the scriptures. The first passage was the story of Abraham and his near-sacrifice of his own son, Isaac. "No way," I thought to myself. "I have trouble with that story. It makes me uncomfortable. It makes me cringe. There must be something better." I could have focused on the Gospel passage or the Epistle, or I could have skipped using the lectionary this week and preached on something more comfortable. But as I thought and prayed about it, I kept coming back to this ancient, awful story. Perhaps I should preach on it because I need to deal with it myself. Perhaps I need to wrestle with this text like Isaac's son Jacob would later wrestle with an angel in the predawn hours at the River Jabbok. Perhaps God has something to say in this story that we don't want to hear, but that we need to hear.

On the surface, it's a well-loved story. It's compelling drama. You'll find it in Sunday school curriculum, in children's Bibles, in art work, and you've heard it preached from, maybe lifting up how faithful Abraham was to God, and shouldn't we be faithful too? God tested Abraham, but Abraham passed the test with flying colors and didn't have to do the horrible thing that he had planned to do.

Yet beneath the surface, the story makes us shudder. What kind of God would make such a terrible demand on anybody? What kind of God would ask a parent to murder his own beloved child? What kind of God would make such a terrible, even evil, demand?

We need the backstory; the context. God had called Abraham; and for years Abraham had responded faithfully to God's call. God had called him many years before, when he was called Abram and his wife Sarai, back in a distant city of

Ur. God had given Abram and Sarai a wonderful promise. If they would be faithful to God, if they would follow to the land that God had promised them, God would fulfill a wonderful promise. God would give them a rich land, but more important, God would give them descendants, more descendants than stars you could see on a cold desert night; more descendants than the grains of sand at a seashore. Since they were childless and beyond child bearing age, it seemed utterly impossible. Yet they packed the camels and made their way west, with their herds and servants, and became nomads. Many years into their journey, three mysterious strangers came, and received Abraham and Sarah's hospitality, and they announced that Sarah would soon be with child. Sarah laughed! How wonderfully preposterous! But it was true, and she gave birth to a son, whose name was Isaac, which meant, laughter. So now, through Isaac, the promise of God, the covenant that God had established with Abraham, could come true.

But now God seemed to call it all back; to void the contract; to cancel the covenant; to kill all the hopes and dreams that they had received from God. "Take your son, your ONLY son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you."

Again, what kind of God would demand the life of a beloved, only, son, and revoke all the promises that he had made to Abraham and Sarah? What kind of God would God insist that Abraham do something cruel and immoral as an act of faith? What kind of God would put a person into such a terrible moral dilemma? What kind of God would ask anyone to perform the ultimate child abuse?

Many pagan religions of that day did practice child sacrifice as acts of ultimate devotion. Did Abraham misunderstand God, somehow, thinking that his God was like

these pagan gods, and it was all a horrible mistake? The story doesn't tell us.

The story does tell us that Abraham and Isaac made their journey. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. As they got near, they gathered wood for a fire. "Father!" Isaac said, "Here I am, my son." "The fire and wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they walked together and got to the place, and Abraham tied up his own son and laid him on the firewood and picked up the knife. Then God called, urgently.

"Abraham! Abraham!" and Abraham answered, "Here I am." "Don't lay your hands upon the boy. Don't hurt him. Now I know that you fear me." And there was a ram caught in a thicket by the horns. The ram replaced the boy as the sacrificial victim. And so they named the place "The Lord will provide."

Our Jewish brothers and sisters, to whom this story belongs, tell us that the purpose of the story is to tell us that their God, our God, does not want human sacrifices. Throughout later Old Testament history, this message would come in loud and clear. This was a sharp dividing line between Judaism and other faiths. Offerings would be made on behalf of children, but children would not be used as offerings. Obedience to God shouldn't go against ethics, it should be rooted in ethics. All the rest of the way through the Old Testament the stand is clear. Child sacrifice, any human sacrifice, is repugnant to God. Did God change? I don't think so. But as time went by, people's perception of God, people's understanding of God did change and grow.

One of the greatest passages in the Old Testament shows us what God really wants. Remember Micah 6:6-8?

With what should I approach the LORD

and bow down before God on high?

Should I come before him with entirely burned offerings,
with year-old calves?

⁷ Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with many torrents of oil?

Should I give my oldest child for my crime;
the fruit of my body for the sin of my spirit?

⁸ He has told you, human one, what is good and
what the LORD requires from you:

to do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with your God.

So--what kind of God do we worship? He doesn't require us to sacrifice our own children, that's for sure. But he is a God who provides. God is with us, even in those deepest, darkest moments when all seems lost. God may not always rescue us from a difficult situation as he rescued Abraham and Isaac by supplying the sacrificial lamb, but he still is there with us, surrounding us with love and strength. What kind of God do we worship? One whose love and compassion we can trust.

Nanette Sawyer, a pastor in Chicago, reflected on this passage in the *Christian Century*. "Some of us have experienced the tragic loss of a loved one and have had to grapple with how God could allow such a thing. ...Sometimes we may even need to lash out at God for not averting the disasters we experience. God does not take our children away to punish us, nor does God spare our children because we are willing to sacrifice them. God does not expect us to express devotion through acts of cruelty. Even if we are mystified by God's role in tragedy, we can be sure of this much."ⁱ

It's not a big step from Micah 6 to Matthew 10—from God's desire of us to offer justice, kindness, and humility to Christ's promise that a cup of cold water given in his name will be blessed. Jesus said these words when he was preparing his disciples to go out and witness to God's coming Reign or Kingdom. They were to go out and receive the hospitality that strangers would offer them; and those who expressed hospitality, who received them, were to be rewarded with God's blessing.

For us, this passage works two ways. It invites us to be hospitable and compassionate, to reach out to those in need, to support those who are doing God's work, and reminds us that even small acts of love and grace can make big differences. It also invites us to be the messengers, to go out like apostles, and spread the good news. That doesn't mean that we should go knock on doors, hand out tracts, and ask "Are you saved?" But it does invite us to share our faith in less obtrusive ways, to invite a neighbor to church, and to spread God's love through word and deed.

What kind of God do we worship? Not one who insists that we sacrifice, but one who made the greatest sacrifice of all for us. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." Amen.

¹ Linked from Christian Century to Textweek.com