

June 28, 2020
The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 8—Year A
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Genesis 22:1-14
Psalm 13
Romans 6:12-23
Matthew 10:40-42

Last weekend marked the first anniversary of my mother's death, which of course got me thinking about it. My father died in 2013. You may remember that my mother fell ill unexpectedly and died three weeks later. My two sisters and I were with her the evening she died. The next morning, we pulled out some of her old photo albums. We had thought we'd already seen everything she had put away, but we were wrong.

The biggest surprises were in the photo album—a scrapbook, really—that included the few snapshots that exist of my parents' wedding in 1953. Also tucked inside were a bunch of loose items, including postcards my father sent my mother from Europe when they were first married and he was still in the Navy. The most startling find was a piece of heavy brown paper filled with my mother's handwriting. It was a detailed chronology of my parents' courtship, from their meeting to marriage. For each date, it gives the date, where they went, and who they were with.

To be honest, what we found that day demonstrated a tenderness between my parents that was seldom visible to others. I was left filled with questions, questions about them, about their relationship, about how their relationship had changed over their nearly sixty years together. I wished we had found that piece of paper even two days earlier. She might have been able to answer those questions. Then again, some questions can never really be answered.

Human lives are spent in a web of relationship. The stories humans tell are all about relationship. The stories of our great-grandparents, of our grandparents, of our parents, are always more complex than they could ever say. Our stories are always more complex than we can ever fully describe. When we hear another person's story, we should listen for what is said *and* what isn't said. When we tell a story, we should notice what we say *and* what we don't say. Meaning lies in all of it.

Most particularly for my purposes today, I want to make this observation: I'm not sure a person can ever truly understand the relationship between two other people. I reached this conclusion many years ago, as I thought about the relationship between my parents. Maybe there's even more to say than that. I'm not sure a person can every truly understand the relationship between another person and God.

For three weeks, we've heard the story of Abraham and Sarah, patriarch and matriarch of the Hebrew tradition. They are patriarch and matriarch of the Christian tradition, too. But, because we focus on Jesus, our relationship with them operates at a remove. They're the great-grandparents we visit occasionally but don't really know. When we do visit, their way of life feels just odd enough that we are slightly embarrassed for them and slightly mortified for ourselves. When they start talking, it only gets worse. *Who are these backwards people? How could they have done what they did?* Dig deeper and it gets even more difficult, *Why would they be in relationship with the God they describe?*

The reading for today is called the Binding of Isaac or, in Hebrew, the Akedah. It's among the narratives that some have termed "texts of terror." As we wrestle with the story, it might help to remember that the words we heard were written down around hundreds of years before Christ regarding events that would have taken place hundreds of years earlier. It might help to remember that it's less *history* than *myth*, and so we're looking less for *fact* than for *truth*. It might help to wonder not, *Why did God behave this way?*, but rather, *Why was the story preserved this way?*

As one might imagine, over the centuries there has been a lot written about the Binding of Isaac, from both Jewish and Christian perspectives. Particularly interesting to me is one Jewish perspective positing that Abraham wouldn't have *actually* sacrificed his son, and that God wouldn't have *actually* had him do so. This interpretation strikes me rather like a very high-stakes masculine-performance game in which God is the first one to cry "Uncle." God is so reluctant to do so that, while his initial instructions to Abraham are communicated directly from God to Abraham, his "Uncle" is transmitted via an angel. While I find this interesting, I'm not sure if it relieves or worsens my mortification. I'm not sure if it makes God seem any less abusive or manipulative.

For another view altogether, one not explicit in the text, Jewish tradition has long linked the Binding of Isaac with the subsequently recounted death of Sarah. The general idea is that she dies of shock after learning about Isaac's ordeal. That's not in the Biblical text but is in subsequent Jewish teaching. I actually do find this helpful, in an oblique way. It makes it clear that this text has been the source of discomfort for a very long time, perhaps particularly for women; in my discomfort, I am in league with many others.

When read most straightforwardly, the story of the Binding of Isaac is generally understood as Abraham's willingness to do as God commands, even to the point of the most unimaginable sacrifice. You might say it's about obedience. For many of us *obedience* is a tough word. It comes freighted with the caution of experience. Maybe it helps to say instead that the story is about *faithfulness*. If it's about faithfulness, then it's about *trust*: we *can* trust God, even when it seems unimaginable to do so.

That trust is really what so much of Genesis is about. God is doing this new thing, with these people in the line of Abraham and Sarah. These people are doing a new thing, what we call *monotheism*. They are creating an entirely new way of understanding the divine, and of living out the relationship of the divine with humanity. This monotheistic God contrasts sharply with the gods of polytheism, who often drop into human existence to do random and outrageous things. Maybe that “dropping in” is a temptation to which God succumbs in tempting Abraham. God succumbed to temptation earlier, when in anger God flooded the earth, after which, seeing the error in *that way*, God vowed to do it never again.

Maybe it’s fair then to say that both parties—divine and human—learn as they go. As Genesis unfolds, God ends up working *in covenant* with the people. By definition, a covenant requires the assent of *both* parties. In a covenant, *both* parties commit to its fulfilment. In a covenant, *both* parties enjoy the benefits of that commitment. As distasteful as today’s story can seem, it also seems that God learns God’s lesson. But have we? If we ever wonder whether we can trust God, we might also wonder whether God can trust us.

The Binding of Isaac has been interpreted by some Christians to prefigure the crucifixion of Jesus. To me that feels like a contortion of the Hebrew Scriptures in a way that is best rejected as damaging supersessionism. Christians have not replaced Jews as the chosen people of God. Even so, we might connect some dots.

So let’s turn briefly to this week’s Gospel reading from Matthew. It’s the third and last installment of the story of Jesus’ first sending of the twelve disciples. Last week we heard Jesus say this: “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”¹ Today he continues: “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”²

In this we hear themes that are threaded through the story of Abraham and Sarah, themes associated with sacrifice and hospitality, with trusting God despite uncertainty. Even well-meaning Christians sometimes try to make a difference between that angry Old Testament God and the kindly New Testament one. I expect it’s much more correct to say that God sent Jesus to confirm what God had been doing all along. God was in profound relationship with Abraham and Sarah; Jesus was in profound relationship with the disciples. All were building communities marked by profound direct relationship with God, relationship characterized as shared faithfulness in mutual covenant and therefore mutual trust.

Whether by choice or by happenstance, life at times is going to be challenging. God counted on Abraham and Sarah; God counted on the disciples; God counts on us. Like Abraham and Sarah, like the disciples, we can count on God.

Notes

¹ Matthew 10:37-39, NRSV.

² Matthew 10:40, NRSV.