

June 28, 2020
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Genesis 22:1-14 God Will Provide?
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Genesis 22:1-14 Common English Bible

After these events, God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" Abraham answered, "I'm here." God said, "Take your son, your only son whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah. Offer him up as an entirely burned offering there on one of the mountains that I will show you." Abraham got up early in the morning, harnessed his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, together with his son Isaac. He split the wood for the entirely burned offering, set out, and went to the place God had described to him. On the third day, Abraham looked up and saw the place at a distance. Abraham said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will walk up there, worship, and then come back to you." Abraham took the wood for the entirely burned offering and laid it on his son Isaac. He took the fire and the knife in his hand, and the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father?" Abraham said, "I'm here, my son." Isaac said, "Here is the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the entirely burned offering?" Abraham said, "The lamb for the entirely burned offering? God will see to it, my son." The two of them walked on together. They arrived at the place God had described to him. Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He tied up his son Isaac and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. Then Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to kill his son as a sacrifice. But the Lord's messenger called out to Abraham from heaven, "Abraham? Abraham?" Abraham said, "I'm here." The messenger said, "Don't stretch out your hand against the young man, and don't do anything to him. I now know that you revere God and didn't hold back your son, your only son, from me." Abraham looked up and saw a single ram caught by its horns in the dense underbrush. Abraham went over, took the ram, and offered it as an entirely burned offering instead of his son. Abraham named that place "the Lord sees." That is the reason people today say, "On this mountain the Lord is seen."

If this is your first time hearing this story, I want you to know that not all of Scripture is this troubling. This is one of the most awful stories in all of Scripture. It is a story about Abraham who loved God and followed God's instructions, even to the point of being prepared to sacrifice his beloved son, when he was convinced that God required this of him.

I deeply dislike this story in our sacred text. As a parent I can't even imagine such a sacrifice. As a Christian, I see this text as a terrible form of divine child abuse.¹ I don't know which is worse, that God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, or that Abraham complies without protest. I just want to shout to Isaac, "Run away! Don't trust your father, he is going to hurt you!" I wonder how people who aren't familiar with the Bible hear this story. They might think, "This is crazy, this is precisely why I don't go to church."

I could give you theories about why God asks Abraham to make this sacrifice, but nothing is going to help because this story is not palpable to our modern ears.

We might want to jump to the end and celebrate that God provides a ram to be sacrificed. We celebrate that God does not require the barbaric sacrifice of children. That may seem like a weird thing to have to say, but at the time of Abraham most other religions had such a requirement. The worshippers of Ba'al regularly sacrificed children because they believed it would appease their gods and ensure a good harvest. So we know the people who heard this story told hundreds of years before Christ was born would not react like we do.

I like to stick with the happy stories in the Bible. I like the stories that make me feel comfortable. I don't want to wrestle with stories that I don't like. Last week Trish Major was at the bank making the church deposit and she saw that a car in the parking lot had a sticker on the back window. It was a cross made out of two guns and bullets. When she showed it to me, I saw the cross right away but it took me a minute to realize that the cross was made out of guns and bullets. All day I wondered about the person who had picked out this sticker and put it on their car. I wanted to talk with them so that I could try and understand why and how.

¹ <https://www.patheos.com/progressive-christian/nasty-little-tale-john-holbert-06-23-2014.html>

How did they get to the place where a cross made out of guns and bullets was something that they wanted to display? Then, I wondered about the person or company that had made the sticker. Who thought of this sticker? What is their understanding of God? Did they grow up going to church? If so, what was their community of faith like? It is so easy to be comfortable and to only be around people who think like I do, but I think we need to wrestle and try to listen to people who are different than us. I am working on being more empathetic because I want to be more Christlike. I may not get it, but I want to be someone who listens.

We don't know what Abraham was thinking. Earlier God had told Abraham to move and he did. Earlier God had told Abraham and Sarah they would have a child and they did. God had provided before. Maybe Abraham was rehearsing God's faithfulness in his mind. Maybe Abraham was reminding himself of all of the times in his past that God had provided.

What does it mean to follow God without question? We can question God's will, interrogate God's intent with our own ethics and moral courage. We Methodists emphasize our reason after all in our theology. If we look at the perspective of the author, the first thing the author said is God tested Abraham. That implies that the author thinks that there is something that Abraham needed to learn and God was the teacher.

Do you know the game of Simon Says?² You do what Simon Says. Let's play. Put your right hand on your ear. I didn't say Simon Says. If you put your right hand on your ear, you lose! Simon Says put your hand on your head. Simon Says clap three times. Simon Says say your first name. Simon Says punch your neighbor as hard as you can in the stomach. Simon Says punch your neighbor as hard as you can in the stomach. Power is the ability to achieve a purpose. Who has the power in Simon Says? You should be saying, "We do!" Simon wanted to see some people get punched in the stomach and nobody did it. Obedience is at the heart of power. The only way the game works is if everybody plays. You all understood that there is a higher rule than the rule that Simon Says to do something, so you do it. You don't punch your neighbor in the stomach, it is wrong. Because you refused to obey, it didn't happen. It is our obedience that sustains the status quo. If our obedience is the stuff holding the oppressive algorithm of our society together, then we can dismantle that arrangement by our mass defection and begin to create a new normal. Power resides with the people.

I wish that I could tie up this story with a bow and say, "here, this makes it all better." Sometimes there is no making it all better. Sometimes we don't understand why something is happening. There isn't always an explanation when your life is falling apart. If we believe in a risen Christ, we know that our brokenness is not the end. There is a resurrection. In order to have a resurrection, you have to have a Good Friday. We have to sit in that pain and wear it and bear it. Come Sunday, we can take off the death clothes and embrace a future, a new tomorrow that only God can provide. Thanks be to God, Amen.

² <https://twitter.com/andrehenry/status/1219789666234191872>