

The Rev. Allison S. Liles
St Paul's Memorial, Cville
Proper 8A June 29, 2014
Genesis 22:1-14

The binding of Isaac or the akedah is one of those Biblical stories that some of us wish would just disappear. There are several upsetting stories like this in Hebrew scripture -- stories of betrayal and infidelity, of racism and murder, of rape and genocide. They are not the warm fuzzy stories of the gospels. These stories make us uncomfortable. They make us question the nature of our loving God. However, most of these stories touch on realities about ourselves and our common humanity that both confuse and terrify us...which is why we keep coming back to them.

Our story today from Genesis is certainly among these shocking and horrifying texts. When we hear it we instinctively ask ourselves how anyone could seriously consider killing his or her own child to please God. We wonder how anyone could believe that God would ask a person to kill a child. And if we are brave enough, we may begin asking ourselves what kind of god would test someone by asking them to kill a child, and whether this could really be the God that we worship.

These questions are important, but before I try answering them, there are a couple other items that need addressing. The first is that these questions arise from *our personal* horror over the idea of sacrificing children, but such questions would not have arisen when this story was first told. In Abraham's day and in the generations following when this story was retold, the religious sacrifice of children was not much of a shock. The fact that later laws found in Leviticus explicitly prohibiting the offering of children as religious sacrifices shows that the practice was common enough to need addressing. So rather than provoke shock, this story originally served as part of the explanation for why the Israelites, unlike worshipers of other gods, did not sacrifice children.

The other thing to note is that a major reason we have trouble with this story is that so many of us approach it first with the assumption that these stories actually happened. When we read it literally guilt paralyzes us, as we know we could never pass such a test of faith. When we read it literally we are overwhelmed with horror over a God that nearly lets a father take a knife to his beloved son. We instead should approach this story first with the assumption that it has something to teach us about ourselves & about God. And only then should we question whether or not it actually took place.

So what does it have to teach us? The narrative states that "God tested Abraham." It doesn't state *what* the test sought to discover, but I think God was seeking to find out *for what* Abraham would sacrifice his child. You see, as much as we are disturbed by the idea of child sacrifices, the truth is that today in modern day America people sacrifice their children all the time. Our country routinely decides that there are causes worth sacrificing our children. We are on the brink of yet another war in which our government will have to decide if the ultimate goal of peace in Iraq is worth sacrificing young men and women. We're on the brink of another war in which children will be lumped into the "collateral damage" category of drone warfare. An estimated 300,000 American children have been sacrificed to sexual human trafficking. And then there are the staggering

numbers of children sacrificed so that adults can continue embracing their constitutional right to bear arms. The Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence reports that 8 children are sacrificed on the altar of the gun every single in our country. From accidental shootings by adults to children who gain access to unsecured guns to gang violence, suicide and the all too common school shootings – an estimated **Ten Thousand** children are shot each year. And for what? So we the people of the United States can stock up on military style weapons? So we can have a personal arsenal of semi-automatic guns in our homes? So we can overthrow the government?

Like Abraham trudging up the hill to Mt. Moriah, we have been fooled into believing that the only way to appease the angry and demanding gun-god is by accepting that our children must be sacrificed. We unquestioningly believe in the ritual practice of manufacturing more and more guns. We continue to give unfettered access to these weapons so they can be used as “protection.” But, in fact, the opposite is true. The more guns we produce and sell, the more people who have them, the more children who are sacrificed.

In the Genesis story, Abraham and Isaac begin their final walk to the site of sacrifice. Isaac’s mind must have been racing, the weight of the wood on his shoulders. The weight of the pit of his stomach as he looks around for the sheep. If Isaac is old enough to carry the wood, he is old enough to understand what is happening. Finally he asks, “Father, the fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb?” His question must have brought Abraham to tears; Abraham can barely answer the boy. He simply says, “The Lord will provide the lamb.”

When I talk to my five-year-old son Hill about the school shootings that happen nearly every single week of the academic year, I am reminded of Isaac’s words. Hill nearly always asks me, “Mommy, will bad guys come to my school?” And each time he says this I hear him asking, “Mommy, am I the lamb to be sacrificed?” It always brings me to tears and like Abraham I can barely choke out my answer, “I pray that it won’t. I pray that God will provide, but I just don’t know.” I should not be scared to send my child to elementary school in August and yet I am because children have become something worth sacrificing so that our country can continue bearing arms.

God’s question was not “would Abraham be prepared to sacrifice his child,” but “for what would Abraham be prepared to sacrifice his child?” And surely that is the question of us, too. What are we willing to sacrifice to continue in this relationship with God? What are we willing to sacrifice to continue in relationship with all the other gods in our life?

The story of the binding of Isaac teaches us that God does not demand the blood of children. God tell us not to sacrifice our children. Not now, not ever. When the voice of the Lord, the God of justice and compassion, cries out, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him” Abraham responds in obedience and faithfulness. And that is where this story is calling us today: to be faithful to God and to our children by refusing to sacrifice them to the gods to whom everyone else is sacrificing their children. When the gods of guns, war, greed and selfish ambition demand that we sacrifice our children, we must have the courage and integrity to resist them. We must instead obey the voice crying out, “Stop! Do not lay a hand on the child.” We are called to choose -- to choose between a God of violence and a God who comes to us embodied in a child.