

ENGAGING FAITH

We all know the story of the sacrifice of Isaac. If you grew up in the church then it has been one of your stories since you were a child. If you came to the church later in life, than it is surely one of the stories that gave you pause the first time you heard it. We all know the story. God asks of Abraham the unthinkable: sacrifice your child, the one you love, your miracle child. And Abraham, with unhesitating obedience, sets out to do just that. It isn't until Isaac is bound and the knife is heading towards him that an Angel of the Lord intervenes and stops the sacrifice.

We know the story. And I'm guessing that if you are living, breathing, thinking human being it raises some question for you. There are many to choose from:

- Why does God ask Abraham to do the unthinkable - to sacrifice his own child?
- What about Isaac? Why is an innocent child bound and almost killed?
- Does Sarah know?
- Why does Abraham so silently submit to this command?
- Why does God test us?
- Are we to respond the way Abraham did?
- Did Abraham pass the test?

There are so many questions to choose from. So many obstacles in this story - is it any wonder that people have such strong emotions when they hear it? Amazement at Abraham's unflinching obedience. Disgust at Abraham's silence and God's request. We all come to this story knowing what it is about and full of our emotions. Which raises for me the question: how do I preach this text? How do I preach a text we all know? How do I preach a text that inspires admiration in some and disgust in others?

I am certainly not going to preach answers, so if you are looking for them, you are out of luck. I don't have any. You might think that after a full year of seminary education I would have some clue about why God does what God does and how we are to respond. But you would be wrong. Apparently at Columbia their idea of giving you your money's worth is to fill you up with more questions and stand beside you while you wrestle with them. So I don't have any answers for the this text, only more questions. But I wonder if we might hear this story one more time and wonder together about what it is doing in our scripture and what we are to do with it:

“After these things God tested Abraham. God said to him, ‘Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ God said, ‘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.’

So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. Then Abraham said to his young men, ‘Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.’

Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, 'Father!' And he said, 'Here I am, my son.' He said, 'The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?' Abraham said, 'God will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.' So the two of them walked on together. When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.

But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.' And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place, 'The LORD will provide;' as it is said to this day, 'On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.'"

This is the Word of the Lord; Thanks be to God.

I find it ironic occasionally that we say 'thanks be to God' after reading a passage that is this difficult. Why are we thanking God for this headache of a text? There certainly have been moments as I have lived in this text when I did not thank God for this text. But we do thank God for our texts, whether they are comfortable or dislocating; and so I wonder what we can find in this text to thank God for.

As I read this text with my questions in mind, I realize there is nothing I can do with God in this text. I have trouble, to put it mildly, with God's command - the fact that God asks of Abraham such an unthinkable act, the fact that God seems to care so little about the psychological well-being of Isaac. But when I read this text again, I find that I cannot do much with God, neither in this story, nor in my own life. I don't understand why God does what God does. God is not within my control nor my understanding. So perhaps it is fitting to have story in which God asks the unspeakable for *no* reason that *I* can understand.

So with the questions of God left in the realm of mystery, I turn to Abraham and wonder about his response to God's command. And I wonder about how *we* engage with God in *our* lives. I can see Abraham's obedience - there is no missing it - it is almost mechanical. He does not delay. He does not complain nor question. He rises early, he prepares, he sets out, he follows through. It is more obedience than I would be able to muster in such a situation. But I wonder if obedience is the same thing as faithfulness. Are we faithful, to God, if we simply obey God's commands without thinking twice?

In Sunday School I learned that Abraham was the father of our faith. So I always assumed that Abraham acted faithfully in this passage as well. But when I got to college one of my professors asked our class if Abraham had passed the test. Of course he passed the test we responded -

doesn't God say so? Not in so many words it turns out. God says God knows that Abraham is obedient and God rewards that by renewing the covenant God already made with Abraham. Well surely, we said, that means that Abraham passed the test? Why is it then, our professor countered, that God never speaks directly to Abraham after that? Why, if Abraham just passed the hardest test of all, does God not continue to be in relationship with Abraham?

His question broke the text open for me - splintered it into pieces, actually, and I haven't been able to put it back together since. I don't know if Abraham passed the test. The text *isn't* clear for me. But if this text isn't clear in telling us why God does what God does and if it isn't clear in setting out how we should respond to God, then why is it here? What is it trying to teach us?

After too many days of beating against this text with questions it never answered, searching for a lesson I could preach, I realized that perhaps the purpose of this text isn't to answer our questions; perhaps it is not even to give us a definitive way to live. Perhaps it is meant to slow us down - to make us ask questions, questions about God and our relationship with God.

We can't say that Abraham did the wrong thing - the text doesn't say that. And we can't say that Abraham did the right thing - the text doesn't say that either. But we can wonder about what it means to be faithfully engaged with God. And we can wonder if Abraham was faithful in his response.

There's something amazing about Abraham's ability to be present before God - open and willing to God's command, no matter what form it will take. But I would argue that faithfulness involves more than presence and obedience. I would argue that being faithful requires engagement with God and engagement with one another.

We see this engagement when Abraham barter with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, but it is strikingly absent in this text. Abraham says nothing to God nor human about the predicament he finds himself in. He raises no questions about why God has asked him to do this, no protests about the fate of his child, no double checks to make sure he has heard correctly. Rather, he rises early in the morning, saddles his donkey, cuts the wood for the burnt offering and heads off.

We live in an exhausting and fearful world and it would be simpler most days if our faith was simply a set of commands we could follow - a list of dos and don'ts. And, there are plenty of people who will tell you that this is exactly what faith is - they'll tell you that to be faithful you must believe these things, live your life in this way, avoid these people, save those people, and show up to church every Sunday morning.

But faith isn't that easy. Faith requires that we be engaged, that we acknowledge the doubts inherent in our faith. Faith requires that we ask hard questions of God and one another. It isn't easy, for there are not often clear answers; but there is richness in the dialogue, both with God and with one another. And, in the end, the story is true, God will provide. Thanks be to God.