

Sermon – “The Unexpected”

Sunday, July 2, 2017

Scripture Readings: Genesis 22:1-14, Matthew 9:9-13

Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, IL

Our first Scripture reading is Genesis 22:1-14. This is one of the most powerful passages in Scripture. The “unexpected” account of Abraham’s near sacrifice of his son Isaac has baffled and challenged people of faith through the ages. What does this incident teach us about what it means to have faith? What does it teach us about the ways God provides for us on our faith journey? This is the Word of God.

*22 After these things God tested Abraham. God said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.”<sup>2</sup> 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.”<sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. <sup>5</sup> 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.”<sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> 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?”<sup>8</sup> Abraham said, “God will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So the two of them walked on together.<sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill<sup>[a]</sup> his son. <sup>11</sup> But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” <sup>12</sup> The angel 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.” <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> So Abraham called that place “The LORD will provide”;<sup>[b]</sup> as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.” Amen.<sup>[c]</sup>*

Our second Scripture reading, Matthew 9:9-13, is especially poignant in light of our first reading. When confronted by the religiously pious, Jesus references Micah and reminds his critics of what is important to God.

*<sup>9</sup> As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him. <sup>10</sup> And as Jesus sat at dinner<sup>[a]</sup> in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting<sup>[b]</sup> with him and his disciples. <sup>11</sup> When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” <sup>12</sup> But when Jesus heard this, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. <sup>13</sup> Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.” Amen.*

The title of the sermon: “The Unexpected”

*The text: “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice.’” Matthew 9:13a*

Let us pray: We thank you, Holy and loving God, that our assumptions and expectations about who you are and what you expect of us fall short again and again. As we reflect on this story of our faith, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

It first occurred to me in a lecture hall at Hope College. To my surprise, I remember the setting with quite a bit of clarity; where I was sitting and where the professor was standing when he broached the subject of this Genesis story. This was not a course in religion but rather a social psychology class. Abraham was not being praised for his obedience which was something I had heard over the years in church. Rather, the health of his action was being questioned and the dangers of this kind of blind obedience were being discussed along with the impact a culture and society can have on an individual. This moment was an epiphany for me and especially troubling as one who felt called into the ministry by this God. It was the first time I fully realized how absurd and troubling this story is. What kind of a God would test a father by asking him to sacrifice his son...a son long anticipated and miraculously born?

We can understand most of the ups and downs of Abraham and Sarah’s life together as recorded in the Book of Genesis. We admire their willingness to reject the idol worship of their parents and sojourn with Yahweh God into an unknown land. We feel their disappointment and frustration of the promise that their descendents will be as numerous as the stars in light of their inability to conceive. We tolerate Sarah offering Abraham her handmaid Hagar as a solution to their infertility only in light of the cultural norm of that time and place. Sarah giving birth at age ninety is difficult to grasp and some of us think it might have been more appropriate for Sarah to cry than to laugh. Hagar and Ishmael, Abraham’s son, being banished in the wilderness after Isaac is born seems cruel at best. We find comfort in the angel of the Lord who protects this mother and child, and we affirm God’s mercy to our Muslim brothers and sisters who trace their faith heritage to Abraham through Ishmael... But the story of God testing Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his son Isaac as a burnt offering is particularly difficult. It is outrageous and unexpected in our stories of faith.

Psychoanalyst Alice Miller has examined some thirty artistic renderings of this story over the centuries and suggests that this text could have contributed to the justification of the abuse of children. She sights two of Rembrandt’s paintings, where Abraham faces the heaven rather than Isaac, as if in blind obedience to God. Abraham’s hands over Isaac’s face prevent Isaac from seeing or raising a cry. The artwork portrays Isaac as a pawn among adults working out their own issues. Something, unfortunately, many social workers witness on a daily basis across the economic spectrum in our society. We, as the faith community, need to be accountable and clear about the message in our biblical stories, how they are interpreted, and what we teach about children.

One has to wonder if God really did test Abraham by asking him to sacrifice Isaac. Although animal sacrifice became a part of Judaism until the Jerusalem temple was destroyed in 70 CE, the sacrifice of children was strictly forbidden. In the book *The Tent of Abraham*, which was the focus of a Westminster Adult Forum Interfaith Presentation in January of 2016, Rabbi Arthur Waskow draws parallels between the high priest sending a goat into the wilderness as a scapegoat for the people’s sin and the Ishmael’s banishment into the wilderness and between

the presentation of a burnt offering as a sacrifice for the people's sin and the Isaac's near sacrifice on Mount Moriah. In both cases, God intervenes and saves the child. Scripture is quite clear about God's feelings on sacrifices. "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice."

It was man, and in this particular instance, it was Abraham who made an assumption about who God is and what God expects. Human sacrifice was an actual custom among some of the Canaanite Tribes during this time in antiquity. It was practiced for centuries and surely Abraham would have been familiar with his pagan neighbors who sacrificed their children to appease angry, whimsical, indifferent gods.

The Valley of Hinnom, located south of the city of Jerusalem near the traditional place commemorating Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac, was notorious for the cremation of children in honor of Baal or Molech. This valley and the memory of these burnings gave birth in later years to the Judea Christian notion of the fire of hell, and became the metaphor for total separation from Yahweh.

But long ago, Abraham was capable of going to the furthest point religion could reach, in spite of knowing better, and risks Isaac's life. Perhaps it was an effort to prove his devotion to Yahweh or perhaps he was driven by the guilt of abandoning his older son Ishmael and his mother Hagar.

The unexpected joy in this story is what we learn about Yahweh in the words that would ultimately be spoken: *Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him.* We learn that God expects and desires something quite different from what Abraham supposed. "I desire mercy and not sacrifice."

According to the Interpreter's Bible Commentary, *the Old Testament is continually lifting the concept of God out of the irrationality and arbitrariness of pagan superstition. When the Almighty is revealed in Genesis 22, we do not find destiny or fate or some cruel pagan deity but a faithful and gracious God, full of mercy and abounding in steadfast love.*

We find a God who provides. And when God did allow sacrifice in the story of our faith as with God's son Jesus on the cross, God entered into and identified so strongly with this human suffering that it became redeeming and life giving. Jesus, an adult man, chose to walk the way of sorrow and took responsibility for his choice to put an end to the charade of scapegoating and sacrificing others for one's own sin. "It is finished!" were the last words Christ's spoke before his breath became air. Within forty years, the practice of animal sacrifice and burnt offerings within Judaism ended when the temple was destroyed in 70 C.E.

When one has the privilege of visiting Jerusalem, one can witness the history of sacrifice traced over thousands of years within a two mile radius. Less than a mile from the commemoration of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac in the other direction of the Valley of Hinnom is the place we call Golgotha.

*"With what shall I come before the LORD,  
and bow myself before God on high?  
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,  
with calves a year old?  
Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?"*

*Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”  
8 God has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the LORD require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God? Micah 6:6-8*

*And Jesus said, “Go and learn what this means, I desire mercy and not sacrifice.” So be it.  
Amen.*