

Abraham and Isaac – not a typical Father-Son story; a sermon on Genesis 22.  
Rev. Rosalind Gnatt, April 2, 2017

Abraham is about to kill his son. Elohim, the ancient name for God that is actually a grammatical plural – the gods, has or have given Abraham an order in order to test him: *“Take your son, the only son whom you love, Isaac —and go to the land of Moriah. Go and sacrifice him as a burnt offering on one of the mountains, which I will show you.”*

What would you say if god told you to sacrifice your child as a burnt offering to said god? I know what I would say: over my dead body is what I would say. Kill me if you must smell the odor of burning flesh, but leave my child alone. Abraham is said to have been 100 years old when Isaac was born. Whether or not he was 100 is beside the point. Abraham had just sent his first son and the child’s mother into the desert to die. Isaac was the only, the last, child Abraham would have. Without Isaac, without Ishmael, no descendants of Abraham, no tribes of Israel, no Bible, no story to tell.

This gruesome story has likely been discussed and argued over more than any other in the entire Bible. Every year on the second day of Rosh Hashanah – the beginning of the high holy days, The Akedah, the story of the binding of Isaac, is read in every synagogue in the world. Every year, every rabbi tries to make sense of this horrifying, step-by-step walk with father and son toward the unspeakable deed of filicide as an act of pious obedience. Every Lenten season, the story appears in the Christian texts. Every congregation, Jewish and Christian, takes this walk with Abraham and Isaac, and is inwardly saying, “Don’t do it! Don’t – do – it!”

Jewish commentary on the Akedah was rare until the third century. The similarity between Isaac walking to his death carrying the wood for the sacrificial fire, and Jesus walking to his death, carrying the wood upon which he would die, became symbolically important for Jewish Christians as well as the remnant of religious Jews that had survived the Roman purge of the Jewish community and final destruction of the temple. Since then, hundreds of volumes have been written on this story alone. There is no consensus on what might have really happened between God, Abraham and Isaac. The Jewish tradition of Biblical study relies on discussion, argument and disagreement. Studying a biblical text in this tradition is akin to observing the light filtering through a prism – there is no one color that can be eliminated from the infinite spectrum that composes what we see as light. Like a rainbow, that always stops me in my tracks and compels me to wonder at the complexity of mere light. For someone like myself, who was often told exactly what each story in the Bible meant, embracing the complexity of our scripture is a wonderful thing.

I’d like to be able to tell you that this story of child sacrifice is the only one of its kind in the Bible. It is not. The prophets, latecomers to the story of the children of Israel, are often found loudly condemning the practice. Devastation due to earthquake or flood or fire, volcanic eruptions or war were all ascribed to the wrath of God or the gods. The sacrifice of first-born children, lambs, calves – the most beloved – was the most valuable thing one could offer to appease such wrath.

One can't help but wonder what sort of relationship Isaac and his father had afterward. Not surprising, this is the very last we hear of father and son together. Abraham goes back down the mountain alone. And God never speaks to Abraham again.

We are nearing the end of the Lenten season. And of course, this story of Abraham and Isaac is at this point in the liturgical calendar to emphasize the connection between father Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son to God and father God's willingness to sacrifice his son Jesus. I do not believe in a god that desires human sacrifice; not from Abraham, not from Jesus. I believe in the Ground of Being, the indescribable I AM that is life-giving. Life encompasses both birth and death – this we know. That is not to say that my sense of God is static.

As Dorothee Sölle said,

"I believe in God who desires the counter-arguments of the living, and the alteration of every condition through our work, through our politics."

Next Sunday is Palm Sunday, the day when we children would march around the block of our church waving palm fronds and singing "All glory, laud and honor to you, redeemer king." In case you're of the opinion that politics has no place in church, it's important to think about what Jesus did when he arranged the most dangerous form of street theater imaginable in his day and time. He did the unthinkable, punishable by death. He mocked Caesar by riding through the gates of Jerusalem and to the temple on a miserable little donkey, his feet dragging, accompanied by the cheers of a ragtag mass of people, who would desert him a few hours later. You see, no one, but no one was allowed to make an entry procession through the gates of Jerusalem except Caesar. Imagine the German Fasching parades with their harshly critical political themes. Imagine a ruler who presented himself as the Son of God. That is what Jesus did, and he knew that, if he didn't disappear fast, he would die for his insolence. We read that he

Unlike Isaac, Jesus had a choice: he had a choice. He could get out of the city, hide out for a while and maybe even go back to the family business. He wasn't a young man – not by the standards of the day. And so much of what he had tried to do, what he had tried to teach, kept falling on deaf ears. He didn't want to die – witness his struggle in the garden, weeping tears of blood, vainly asking his best friends to stay with him while he wrestled with this life-and-death decision. Please, father, give me an answer. God was silent. Jesus had to decide on his own.

Where would we be today if Jesus had decided to go home? Not here. Whose wisdom, whose sacrifice, would be a light for you, for me?

Amen