

"The Most Troubling Command"

Genesis Series - Decisive Moments

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July 17, 2011
Genesis 22:1-19

Our passage this morning is fairly well known and very challenging to our modern sensibilities. I was pleased to read this week that even Martin Luther and John Calvin struggled with this text, almost 500 years ago. The commentaries also point out that this is one of *"the most beautifully told and move moving of the stories of Genesis."* Author Elie Wiesel says this: *"As a literary composition, this tale is unmatched in scripture . . . every word reverberates into infinity."* As a preacher I find it one of the hardest passages in the Bible to preach on. Let's take a look:

Genesis 22:1-19

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He 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 himself 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."

The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, "By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice." So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham lived at Beer-sheba.

Can you see why this is a difficult passage to preach? It's a difficult passage to interpret. "notoriously difficult," as one commentary put it. Because no one comes off looking good in the story, not even God! (forgive me, Lord)

A. God gives Abraham an inhumane command - kill your son.

B. And Abraham obeys the command.

He's obedient but he comes off a bit spineless.

In a human army you're not to obey an immoral command.
Is Abraham heroic for obeying God's command?
Or is he overly-submissive and too passive?
C. Isaac also seems passive and weak as well.

It is odd to have such negative feelings about a passage. I love the Bible, but I don't love all passages equally. The story is told of St. Paul walking into an ancient Greek city long, long ago. And standing outside the gates of the city are a bunch of women holding signs, "Down with Paul!" "Paul is a Chauvinist!" "Equality Now!" St. Paul looks at them and says, "Oh, I see you got my letter."

Of course we're going to wrestle with parts of the Bible. Partly because the Bible reflects the time period in which it was written. It was written in ancient Hebrew not modern Hebrew. It was written in ancient Greek not modern Greek. It speaks to us God's truth but it's often flavored by the time period in which it was written. And so, in Abraham's Day there were religious ceremonies where humans were sacrificed, even children. In II Kings 3:27 the King of Moab sacrificed his eldest son to try to gain the favor of his God during a time of war.

One of the interpretations of this passage is that it signifies that this new religion of Abraham would require animal sacrifices and not human sacrifices. So, that makes me feel a little bit better about the passage. In it's day, it was progress.

One commentary even suggests that Abraham misunderstood God - that God never intended for Abraham to sacrifice his son. *"The climax of the story is the revelation that what the voice of God would ultimately say was something completely different from what Abraham in his first agony of acceptance had supposed. The ways of God are sometimes hidden and at first not understood."* (The Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 1, p. 643) That's a possible interpretation, it seems to me, but if we stop there we might miss some of the richness of the text.

Elie Wiesel is an author, Holocaust survivor, Nobel Peace Prize winner and professor at BU. His most famous work is Night, but he also wrote a

book on some of the great characters in the Bible, called, Messengers of God. Wiesel says this about our text this morning,

"The Sacrifice of Isaac: Here is a story that contains Jewish destiny in its totality, just as the flame is contained in the single spark by which it comes to life. Every major theme, every passion and obsession that make Judaism the adventure that it is, can be traced back to it: man's anguish when he finds himself face to face with God, his quest for purity and purpose, the conflict of having to choose between dreams of the past and dreams of the future, between absolute faith and absolute justice, between the need to obey God's will and to rebel against it; between his yearnings for freedom and for sacrifice, his desire to justify hope and despair with words and silence - the same words and the same silence. It is all there." (p. 69)

Let's walk through the story.

Ch. 22:1: *"After these things God tested Abraham."* Does God test us? Life certainly tests us, but does God? It's not the way we usually think about God, but it is a concept found in the Bible. UCC Scholar Walter Brueggemann puts it this way:

"The testings which come in history and which are from God drive us to find out whether we mean what we say about our faith being grounded solely in the gospel." (Genesis commentary, p. 190)

Jesus himself was tested during his 40 days of temptation. It was a chance for Jesus to demonstrate that he would be true to his calling. Some commentators suggest that the temptation was meant to strengthen Abraham, to show him the purity of his faith and how far he was actually willing to go in service to God, and to make him an example for others to follow. Being tested and passing the test can truly deepen our faith and purify it.

Elie Wiesel is an expert on ancient Judaism, especially on the Talmud and what's called "Midrash." These are the writings of ancient Jewish Rabbis interpreting the Scriptures. Wiesel says there is as much writing on this

passage as there is on the Creation of the World and on the giving of the Ten Commandments. The ancient rabbis had trouble making sense of this passage as well. And they had many different interpretations of this passage.

One of the ways they made sense of it was to view it through the lens of Job. You'll recall that in the book of Job God is bragging to Satan about how righteous and blameless Job is, and Satan says, "Of course, he is. Look at how you've blessed him. Take it all away and you'll see how much he really loves you. I'll bet it's not much." And so God puts Job to the test.

The ancient rabbis envisioned a similar conversation concerning Abraham - "Of course Abraham loves you. Look at how you've blessed him. Land. Power. Wealth. Fortune and Fame. And now you've given him a son at age 100. Take away what is most precious to him and then see how much he loves you." And so the theory goes, God complies and decides to test Abraham in the exact same way he tested Job. God says he'll take away that which is most precious to Abraham, his son Isaac.

What's remarkable is how horrendous and enormous this requested sacrifice is. Think back to the passage we studied last week. Ch. 21 Abraham had been promised by God that his offspring would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. And after 25 years of heartache Isaac is finally born. Is name literally means "laughter." And all the promises to God - land, descendants, blessed to be a blessing - would then be handed down through Isaac. And now Isaac is to be taken away? It makes no sense! This is a text that reminds us that the actions of God do not always make logical sense to us. God doesn't seem to feel the burden that we often do to always be so "reasonable." But it's more than that.

John Calvin, the great Protestant Reformer, put it this way: *"The command of God and the promise of God are in conflict."* Martin Luther said, *"This is a contradiction where God contradicts himself."*

My feeling is that Abraham was aware of this contradiction, and that's why he obeyed. I like the theory that not only was Abraham being tested,

he was also testing God. He was testing God to see if God was going to keep his promise - of a son, of a huge family, of blessing. He was testing God to see if God really was who God said he was. That's why he's certain, "God will provide a lamb for the sacrifice." He's saying, "If God is who I think God is, this will work out ok."

Let me close with these thoughts: Christians have an advantage in interpreting this passage. For Christians have long seen the sacrifice of Isaac as a forerunner to the Sacrifice of Christ. For Christians this passage is foreshadowing. It's prophetic, in terms of what the Messiah would endure. As Abraham's faith was tested, so too, was Christ. In the Garden of Gethsemane he asked that the cup be taken from him, but he passed the test when we said, "Nevertheless, not my will be done, but thy will be done." That was after the Last Supper on Thursday night. On Good Friday, God did what he spared Abraham from doing - sacrificing his only Son. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son" (John 3:16). Abraham and Isaac were led to a hill in the land of Moriah. The Bible says that Jerusalem was built in the land of Moriah. Jesus, too, was taken to a hill in the land of Moriah. He was crucified just outside the Jerusalem city walls, offered up on a hill known as Golgotha.

Just as Isaac carried the firewood which was for his own sacrifice, Jesus carried his own cross upon which he would be sacrificed. Just as Isaac was as good as dead for the three day journey with his father, Jesus was dead and rose to new life on the third day. Abraham reassured Isaac with these amazing words: "God will provide a lamb for the offering my son." And God did provide for us Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." God does indeed provide.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

(If you found the end of this sermon meaningful do a "Google Search" for Michael Card's song, "God Will Provide a Lamb.")