

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Sermon 6.28.20

**Genesis 22:1-14**

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."<sup>2</sup> 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.<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.

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 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.<sup>10</sup> 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."<sup>12</sup> 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."<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"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided."

**Matthew 10:40-42**

Jesus said to the disciples, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."<sup>41</sup> Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous;<sup>42</sup> and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward."  
(500)

About a decade ago, our denomination, the United Church of Christ, embarked on a marketing campaign with the slogan, "God is still speaking." It caused more of a stir than I'd have thought. After all, I had always felt that God was still speaking. My childhood was animated by

that experience of God, and my adulthood was banked on it—of God living and sustaining and active and present and continuing to reveal Godself to me, to us all.

“God is still speaking,” read the banners and bumper stickers, going on to admonish, “Never put a period where God has put a comma.”

I think it was the admonishing that provoked—because there were reports of pushback. Apparently, where some UCC churches put up banners on their lawns, other banners popped up on other churches’ lawns: “God has spoken. Never put a comma where God has put a period.”

It was all about the Bible. That’s my guess. The retort was to correct the notion that so-called progressive churches like the UCC have come unmoored from “tradition,” have interpreted the Bible with such a liberal spirit that it bears no resemblance to its original intent. (Of course, some of these people interpret the book of Revelation to be about current events. Now, that’s a liberal interpretation. So, you have to take their understanding of “tradition” as compromised.)

But the really puzzling thing about the pushback is that the Bible itself insists upon a God who is still speaking—who is still speaking throughout its pages and even well beyond its pages, well beyond the Bible’s bidding. This is surely the implication in Jesus’ assurance, “Remember, I am with you always, until the end of the age.” This is surely the implication that, having died and then been raised and now to ascend to heaven, he yet told his gathered disciples, “Remember, I am with you always, until the end of the age.” And why stay with us if not also to speak to us, by whatever new means this new way of being present might require and make possible?

Really, over and over again, the Bible testifies to a God who is always spilling out of what vessel had once contained this god, always tearing down what structure had once given shape to this god. The God of the Bible is simply more restless than all that, ever moving beyond what boundary had long been thought as God implying “this far, and no farther.” There is always some “farther” toward which we should follow in faith.

So, maybe so-called “progressive” churches aren’t so condemnable: Our faith is to progress. This is, in fact, the movement of faith: it’s not a settled thing, it’s a progressing thing.

Abraham taught us that, old Abraham, so long ago.

Abraham taught us this because this is what he learned. Upon leaving Ur and setting out, to Haran, to Shechem, to Bethel, to Hebron, he everywhere found that God also was there. He

found, in the language of Godly Play, that God was not just here or there but that all of God was everywhere.

Of course, there's hardly a story more urgent with the notion that God is still speaking than the one we just heard—this story of Abraham and Isaac in the land of Moriah, this story that's known in Hebrew as the *Aqedah*, which means binding, though it might just as well be called the Unbinding. Not the binding of Isaac, here, but the *un*binding of him: that's what this story is about.

You might know this story. It's a hard one to forget. Even if you're not well versed in many of the stories of the Hebrew Bible, this is one you might remember—this story of astonishing obedience, herculean obedience. Would you obey like this? Could you? “Abraham, Abraham! Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, to the land of Moriah...”

It's one of the oldest stories in the Bible, and one of the most worried about. Soren Kierkegaard, Danish philosopher (or theologian, depending on whom you ask) spent years anxiously meditating on it and writing a strange, brilliant book on it, *Fear and Trembling*, which I then spent a year meditating on, doing my graduate thesis on this terrible story that for some reason I love.

I don't know why. I can't explain. If this is a story about astonishing obedience, then it makes even less sense. I am famously *not* obedient. Just ask my parents. But I blame them. I was raiser around terriers, so I had willful role models.

But, you know, maybe this wasn't such an astonishing act of obedience. No, maybe this was a matter of course. Of course, God would want returned to God this long-promised son. Of course, God would demand back this beloved son.

Isaac! Abraham and Sarah had waited and waited. They'd believed promises, promises that came for decades, though the son promised wouldn't come *for decades*. And they were getting older.

And older.

At last!

But of course.

When Abraham and Isaac, with the bundle of sticks for the burnt offering, together left their tent for the land of Moriah, did Sarah know? What did she think? What would she do about it?

Of course.

It's difficult to say just how common a practice child sacrifice was. We have nearly no archeological evidence that it was prevalent, but a lack of evidence doesn't prove anything. We have lots of narrative mention of it, and some scriptural assurance that God doesn't demand it, the prophet Micah even wondering, "Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" Such protests are suggestive, right? (For what it's worth, the answer came back: "No." No, for this is what's required, that you do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with your God.)

That said, mention of the practice is more often in reference to something other peoples do—and that's always hard to interpret. It might have been written as propaganda, in order to justify enmity of those other people.

On the other hand, it might have been based in fact.

It might have true about the Canaanites who worshipped Baal, he whose name would degrade to Beelzebub. Meaning lord of the flies, this might be meant to signal the presence of something putrid.

It might have been true about the Ammonites. They worshipped Moloch, a god believed to have demanded and devoured children. A terrifying god can maintain an orderly, obedient people.

It might even have been true about the earliest Israelites as they yet figured out the sort of God they worshipped. It's not for nothing that there are two words in the Hebrew Bible which denote the God of the Israelites. One is the generic term, *elohim*, which is translated "god" and is thus used to denote all those other gods as well—all those neighboring gods of the neighboring peoples. The other is a specific term, YHWH, which is translated the LORD and whom we first meet formally eons later when Moses encountered that burning bush, from which the voice claimed this as his name, an unpronounceable breath, YHWH, standing for "I am that I am," which is to say being. Mere being. Persistent being. Utter and true being. This doesn't seem like a god who would devour children, or anyone for that matter.

As it happens, these two names feature in this one story, though the LORD hadn't yet been formally introduced, consciously revealed.

*Elohim*, the more generic term, is the one who ordered the first call, the call that of course would come. ("Abraham! Abraham! Take you son, your only son, whom you love...") And Abraham would do it, though maybe not because he was so amazingly obedient, so awesomely faithful, maybe instead because this was the common, culturally dictated thing to do. He feared just what he was trained to fear, the God whose name might have referred to any number of gods exercising power in those days, even terrible power.

Consider (if you can) all the things *you* do because it's what we do in this culture—even if it comes at some future cost that future generations will pay.

Consider (if such a thing is even possible) all the things you don't even question doing because our cultural framing of reality doesn't allow for such questioning. Those things inherent, those attitudes and behaviors that just come as if by instinct: it's hard to get ahead of those things.

What gods do *you* fear, which has you just going along to get along? The cost can be high, but somehow the cost of not doing it feels higher.

So, of course, Abraham would walk with Isaac to the land Moriah, and of course God would demand such a thing. Of course.

The wonder is that together they would walk home, that together Sarah would spy them returning home, that the Lord would insist: "Do you not lay your hand on him."

Did you notice? It was *God* who said to Abraham, "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," causing Abraham to rise early in the morning, saddle his donkey, cut wood for the burnt offering, and take two of his young men with him and his son Isaac.

And it was *God* who showed him the place in the distance that on the third day Abraham looked up and saw, and so 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."

It was *God* who caused Abraham to take the wood of the burnt offering and to lay it on his son Isaac while he himself carried the knife, which in turn caused Isaac to wonder to his father, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

And it was *God* whom Abraham believed had provided the offering—Isaac himself.

So, the two walked on together.

And when they came to the place that *God* had showed him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order so to worship rightly this *God*, who requires burnt offerings properly slaughtered. And he bound his son Isaac, who now kept silence. And he reached out his hand and raised the knife to kill his son, as *God* ordered him to do.

It was the LORD, though, who sent an angel to call to Abraham from heaven, saying, “Abraham, Abraham!” to which Abraham replied, “Here I am,” which is better translated as one brief word, like it is in Hebrew, “*Hineni!* Ready!”

And it was the LORD whose angel said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God—the God who demands sacrifice, the God from whom you shall now turn away in favor of the faith that comes of being in love. Since you have not withheld your son from me, I will now disclose something new about me.”

And it was the LORD who caused Abraham to look up and to notice a ram caught in a thicket by its horns, such that Abraham offered it as a burnt offering instead of his son. It was, indeed, the LORD who provided.

Abraham had thought God would provide the sacrifice: it was a matter of course. It was in fact the LORD who provided: it was a matter of something new, the LORD himself, being in love.

The unbinding of Isaac.

You know, the word “religion” has something to say about binding. At its root, “religion,” is *ligio*, which is Latin for binding—as in ligament, the thing that secures in the body bone to its bone. Think of that valley of the dry bones which Ezekiel saw. A mass grave of a slaughtered people, now they would come together, bone to its bone, clattering and reattaching and rising and living again. This is an image of resurrection; this is also an image of religion at work, how it can bind a people together as a people, how it can bind a people back to their god and their lives. Religion is a binding back, a binding again. And God blesses it.

And God blows it up.

According to scripture, God blesses this sort of binding, and then God blows it up.

As often as the LORD according to the Bible seems to bless some religious practice, that same LORD at some other time seems to withdraw that blessing, to release the people from that

binding, to find another, maybe looser, binding. We see throughout scripture God gathering and blessing a people by means of “religion,” and then God declaring in its regard: “Unbind him and let him go. Unbind them and let them go.” Really, as often as the Bible would prescribe for us right religion it then prescribes for us an undoing of that, a letting loose of that, a reforming of that and beginning again.

Those sacrifices as of old: they won’t do any longer. It’s time for something new.

This all seems to me particularly on point today. As we gather beyond the buildings that often bind us, as we are indeed safest beyond the walls that often give shape to our practice and place to our gathering, we are being pressed into something new. Really, we’re safest unbound of what we so often call our churches. But who among us would claim we are any less the church, any less a people of God, a people of the LORD?

This all seems even more pressingly on point during this time when it seems everything is suddenly open for rethinking. Everything.

I sat with an old friend this week who is Black and who, though having been raised in an environment different from mine, is yet as an adult quite similar to me. She’s in a “helping” profession. She’s a mother (though of five kids). She’s dealing with mid-life changes and demands. She’s watching her kids approach their adulthood, set up for some success though also struggling here and there.

And yet there is always, always, that veil between us. Racism and the lie of white supremacy bear down on all of our relating, from the lightest of small talk to the heaviest of social transformation and radicalization and rage.

And I hate it—I hate this veil; I hate this lie.

And lately I’ve been thinking, “O my God, this might end within my lifetime.”

I hadn’t realized how much I want that. I’d sort of put away the hope that it might (it might end in my lifetime!), however dormant that hope always has been. As a white person living mostly among white people amidst white culture, I haven’t subjected myself to racialized existence. But now, sitting with my long-ago friend, I realized I want that—not to be racialized but also not to be segregated in my whiteness.

Don't get me wrong: I don't mind being white; I just don't want to be exalted by the lie of white supremacy, not while she's held down by it, its knee on the neck of people like her, made to struggle to breathe while knowing well it is *such a lie*.

But maybe now some truth is being spoken. Maybe now some new imperative of the LORD is being spoken forth and given a chance. Maybe it's the kids these days. Maybe it's the internet. Maybe they know, white supremacy is a lie. Maybe at long last we'll name it and see it, and it will be demystified and drained of its deceptive power. Maybe now.

God is still speaking, and maybe this is what the LORD is saying.

We must yet listen. Lives depend on it.

Thanks be to God.