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Grace Episcopal Church, Bath, Maine
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Genesis 22:1-14

Abraham hears God, "take your son, your only one, the one whom you love..." Abraham rises early the next day, shakes Isaac awake. "We're going to the mountain to make a sacrifice." Isaac is groggy. Moves slowly. Surely his mother, Sarah, is sound asleep, unaware of what's happening. I mean, she has to be unaware, right?

They start out in the chill morning air. When they arrive at the base of the mountain, Abraham unloads the wood from the donkey and places the bundle on Isaac's back. So Isaac must be old enough to handle such a load, probably at least 10, 12? Some scholars think even up to 20.

They travel 3 days. When they arrive, Abraham instructs his servants to stay back with the donkey, and he and Isaac head up the hill. Isaac is fully awake by now, and reasoning. "Father, the fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb?" Isaac intuits things are amiss.

They arrive at the place God has described, Abraham lays out the cleaver, the wood, his son. And God intervenes.

How do we cope with such a story? How do we make sense of God posing such a distasteful test, especially in the Episcopal church, where God is often viewed as all mercy and warm fluffies.

I looked at the *Ancient Christian Commentary* to see how the early Church Fathers interpreted the scene. Saint Ambrose read it as an act of obedience and faith, writing, "... Abraham offered his son as a holocaust, and like a man devoid of natural feeling he drew his sword so that no delay might dim the brightness of his offering. . ." (*Ancient Christian*

Commentary, Genesis 12–50, 108). The brightness of his offering hurts my heart. How about you?

When my husband Joseph was in the monastery, one of the brothers preached on this text. The brother enthusiastically praised Abraham’s faithfulness and obedience to God and portrayed Abraham as a hero of the faith.

After the service, an older woman walked up and lit into him. She had lost a son to suicide and said, I paraphrase, “It’s very easy for you to praise a story about the death of a son. But you could never be so congratulatory about Abraham if you had experienced such a thing.”

We do not hear from Isaac’s mother, Sarah, in the story, but we can imagine her tone might be similar.

Contemporary scholar Jean Louis Ska, who sees Abraham as less heroic, compares the God of Abraham’s trial to the God of Job, where God is often perceived as an enemy rather than as an unconditional ally (“Genesis 22: what question should we ask the text?” *Biblica*, 2013, volume 94, issue 2, 266).

Ska notes that Job’s words, “I was at ease, and he broke me in two” (Job 16:12) could just as easily have been spoken by Abraham as he stood over his bound son.

Modern Christian theologian Walter Brueggemann reminds us that such challenges from God exist also in the New Testament.

Jesus warns the disciples in Mark, “*As for yourselves, beware, for they will hand you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them. . . . When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say, but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak but the Holy Spirit. . . . the one who endures to the end will be saved.*” (Mark 13:9–13)

We read in 1 Peter, “*In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.*” (1 Peter 1:6-7)

I wonder if we can read Genesis 22 not as a test, but as a story of how God protects Isaac from his overzealous father. Remember, in Genesis 21, at Sarah’s jealous impulse Abraham expels Hagar and the son he conceived with Hagar, Ishmael, to the desert. Abraham is prone to rash decisions.

Philosopher Immanuel Kant offered this critique, “There are certain cases in which man can be convinced that it cannot be God whose voice he thinks he hears; when the voice commands him to do what is opposed to the moral law, though the phenomenon seemed to him ever so majestic and surpassing the whole of nature, he must count it as a deception” (Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, trans. M.J. Gregor; New York: Abaris, 1979, 115).

We don’t read about Isaac panicking and trying to get away. Maybe because this is a story of Isaac’s faith? What if the story is about God’s care for Isaac in his moment of primal fear, providing as an answer to Isaac’s nervous question, “Where is the lamb?” with a ram stuck in a thicket.

As put by 4th century Church father, Ephrem the Syrian, “The mountain spit out the tree and the tree the ram. . . . the ram that hung in the tree . . . had become the sacrifice in the place of Abraham’s son. . .” (*Ancient Christian Commentary*, Genesis 12-50, 110).

When my first son was born, I gave him one of those books, “A Grandfather Remembers,” which is filled with dozens of prompts for the grandparent to fill in, like, Q: “What radio programs did you listen to?”

A: “The Lone Ranger & The Shadow Knows.”

My father was not a religious man. But the last thing he wrote in the book, unprompted by any question, was “The one thing I learned about life is that all the things you worried about never materialized.”

My father’s life was by no means charmed. He was born during the Great Depression. His mother abandoned him in a basket on the dining room table when he was six months old. He spent the first four years of his life after that in an orphanage.

When his father retrieved him from the orphanage, he was met by a stepmother who did not care for him. His father was violent. As the child of Russian immigrants, he was bullied by other kids for being different.

At age 17, during WWII, he enlisted in the Navy to avoid being drafted into the army. The last half of his life he owned a small saddle shop in Arizona, working six days a week and almost never took a vacation. He worked ‘til he was 70.

”The one thing I learned about life is that all the things you worried about never materialized.” God provides. Did God not provide for Hagar and Ishmael, abandoned in the desert? Did God not provide for Isaac? Has God not provided for us? Even in our most difficult moments?

What if we read the binding of Isaac as a story of how God does not need our extravagant displays of faith. od answers our nervous prayers.