

September 17, 2017

The Wood, the Binding and the Willing Son

Annette Hill Briggs

Genesis 21:1-6; 22:1-14

[Genesis 21:1-6 – The Birth of Isaac]

The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. ² Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. ³ Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. ⁴ And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. ⁵ Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. ⁶ Now Sarah said, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.”

[Genesis 22:1-14 – The Command to Sacrifice Isaac]

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” ² 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.” ³ 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. ⁴ On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. ⁵ 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.” ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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?” ⁸ Abraham said, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So the two of them walked on together.

⁹ 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. ¹⁰ Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” ¹² 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.” ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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.”

I cannot help but think that Abraham's heart was broken to have lived through such a day. Covered in ram's blood and speechless to explain his tears. Sarah, on the other hand – I bet she had plenty to say when they all got home. I can only read this story as a mama, not a preacher. Or, at least, everything my preacher mouth says is filtered through my mama heart and brain. I'm here to tell ya, I wouldn't do it: sacrifice my child, take one step at the suggestion of sacrificing my own child to prove my devotion to God. I'd sooner cut my own throat. And Lord help him if my husband did what Abraham did and I found out about it. Even if he did bring the boy home, I'd never speak to him again. He'd be dead to me whether or not he breathed.

Sarah herself dies in the next chapter. Granted she was 127 years old, but still. After all the stuff Abraham pulled, like the time he passed her off as his sister – essentially gave her to a foreign king for a couple of nights to save his own skin! This stunt with Isaac, I believe, is what finally did her in.

I'm gonna go ahead and tell you the end of the sermon now, the only sense I can make of so obscene, so outrageous a story: we simply are not capable of the faith to which God calls us, this call to give up everything, to leave home and family as if they were nothing more to us than property, to trust God alone and altogether, no matter how terrible the circumstance. WE cannot do it. Such faith can only come FROM God.

The wood, the binding, and the willing son of Genesis 22 is the worst story imaginable – the stuff of nightmares. And yet, here it is in the Bible, front and center, just daring us to keep believing in the Creative God who brings life from death.

Why would such a God ask such a thing? The rabbis and scholars are rife with ideas. Many of them say it's a test of obedience, of ultimate faith in God. Taken at face value, the Old Testament would have us imagine Abraham never wavered. "Okay, God, no problem God." He packed, he walked, he put the wood on his son's back and picked up the fire and the knife. He bound his son and raised the knife. How old is this child, by the way? Little, like Aden and Reed? Almost grown like Andy? Full-grown like Rob? Abraham calls him a boy – which means nothing. Carl's daddy called him "sweetheart" his whole life. We don't know. There's no suggestion the boy struggled. He appears to have been light enough for a 100-year-old man to subdue, so probably not a toddler. Or, more likely, he just trusted his daddy that much.

So Abraham raised his knife to the throat of his boy and the angel believed he would do it. The rabbis arguing the passage since then don't agree. Half of them are on the angels' side. Others believe Abraham knew all along God would not make him go through with it. Either way, it reads to me like a sadistic game God is playing with the life of a child. No theological point rises to such worth.

But here's the thing: however outrageous the story, this is not an entirely abstract situation. Such predicaments happen all the time. At Riley Hospital this very minute

there are parents in the crucible of horrible, impossible decisions about their kids' lives, who want to know WHY God has put them in this nightmare. In Yemen, South Sudan, Syria, people are watching their own children starve. Do they feed each of them a little so that they starve more slowly, or stop feeding one so the others might live and be well?

If the whole world is in God's hands, are those parents and kids in God's hands too? Is God accountable for their crisis? I do not know. The best I can unravel it is this – and believe you me, I know how far short of a satisfying answer this is:

ONE: God made humans for companionship and co-creation, to be God's friends and partners in caring for the rest of the world. But robots can't be friends, so we were made free; God made us free to choose friendship and partnership with God, or not. When and where we choose yes, creation thrives. When and where we don't, creation suffers – us included.

TWO: The name "Abraham" means "Father of Many," which God gave Abram when God first made him this promise to be the Father of a nation, with progeny as numerous as the stars. This is in Genesis, chapter 12. "Father of Many" sounded kind of like a joke, since Abraham and his wife Sarah were older than old, and so far they had exactly zero children.

But Abraham and Sarah went along with it. They picked up and moved from where they were and traveled forever and had lots of adventures, but no babies. In chapter 17, God promises Abraham that he is going to have soooo many kids and grandkids, and they will all come through the son he's going to have by Sarah, who is approaching her 90th birthday pretty fast. Understandably she gets impatient, and in a moment of poor judgment she offered Abraham her maid Hagar for the night. Abraham resisted of course, knowing there was no way this could possibly end well – but he only argued for all of about ten seconds, and Hagar got pregnant.

By the time Hagar's baby was about to be born, Sarah realized the mess this was and made Abraham send her away, and Hagar ends up stranded in the desert with a screaming newborn. So that's when God tells 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." Well, I just think that is pretty crappy of God to act like Abraham doesn't have two boys. But that isn't the point at the moment – the point being, in chapter 21 the Bible says, finally God did for Sarah as God had promised. And she has this sweet, sweet boy, whom she names Laughter.

Here's why I call the story a sadistic game: it's bad enough one should threaten a child. But God???? And this child, the child so long promised? But again: ordained and orchestrated by God or not, the world operates just like this all the time, does it not? If you want to blame God, I think that's okay. I think God is big enough to handle it. And this: while Genesis 22 may be a central story in the text, it is not the first nor the last word regarding the heart and purposes of God.

AND THIS is #THREE: The wood, the binding and the willing son do not just appear here. The story of the text – of God in the lives of humanity, of our lives in Christ, our life together, and our life in this world – is the great arc of the story of God and God's people, played over and over in the scriptures, playing over and over in the church, playing over and over in my own walk with God. Just like with Abraham: God calls, God blesses, God tests, God provides. People are called and blessed and tested. Inevitably they fail. Inevitably they are loved and wanted and redeemed and made whole again.

Despite all our desires and best intentions, fear overwhelms us more often than faith. And what do we discover? We are not lost after all, but rather, God has come along to take us the rest of the way. God – who hoped we would trust him more than we did – is full of mercy when we just can't.

I would offer: these characters in Genesis 22 are like shadow puppets playing off the light of the gospel. Tell me where you can see it. Imagine that Jesus is imitated in multiple characters: Abraham, Sarah, Isaac – and even the ram:

- This long-promised, long-expected child;
- Abraham's (almost) unquestioning obedience;
- Isaac's passive acceptance of impending suffering;
- this line, "your son, your only son," mindful of the baptism of Jesus;
- the servants (disciples) who cannot go all the way with him;
- the donkey (beast) bearing the burden of the sacrifice;
- Isaac carrying his own wood for sacrifice;
- the son asking his father if the sacrifice is necessary;
- the mother, not consulted or included, left to stand to the side in helpless agony – like Mary. But also like God, watching the beloved creation.

And there was the sacrifice – not the boy, but the ram. Abraham did not escape having to draw blood, to kill. Death is ugly business all around, but not negotiable. And then, there is discipleship. It's pretty easy, isn't it, to name off that handful of things which we would NEVER do, no matter what.

"I'll never sacrifice my child, Lord. You can forget that right now!"

"Okay – well – how about going across the street and talking to your neighbor then, Annette, how about that?"

"I'm serious, Lord, I will NOT sacri... – Wait, what? Lord, that guy is such a jerk. For real, he's awful. "

The obedience and the faith to which God has NOT called me, sadly, does not relieve me of the faith to which God has. This story is outrageous. I mostly hate it. But in the context of my life here and now, it can show me that whatever faith and courage any given moment calls for, God is with me, keeping God's promises, whether or not I can see

it in real time. If all I can do is take the next step, the next step is the step of faith that I must take. That one step may be all the faith God gives me at a time.

But the scriptures and the witness of the church bear out the truth that, at the end of all things, God takes up the slack when and where we finally fail. And God brings life from death. Does that answer every problem in the story? Nope. You want to stay here until we get that all figured out? I didn't think so. The rabbis believed the biblical text is a reflection of God, a way of knowing the Divine. Because the Divine is infinite, they reasoned, the text has infinite meaning. The more you search for it, the more there will be to search.

I cannot help but think that Abraham's heart was broken to have lived through such a day. To come home, covered in ram's blood, weeping tears he could never explain to his child's mama. The story of Chapter 23 is his quest to find the perfect place to bury her. The end of the sermon is this: We simply are not capable of the faith to which God calls us, this call to give up everything to follow Him, to leave home and family as if they were nothing more to us than property – to trust God alone and altogether, no matter how terrible the circumstance.

Thus, the wood, the binding and the willing son.