

The Birth of Isaac

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

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

⁹When 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. ¹⁰Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill^[a] his son. ¹¹But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ¹²He 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." ¹³And 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. ¹⁴So Abraham called that place "The LORD will provide";^[b] as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided."^[c]

¹⁵The angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, ¹⁶and said, "By myself I have sworn, says the LORD: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷I 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, ¹⁸and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice."

July 23, 2017

Issac: No Laughing Matter

Genesis 21:1-6; 22:1-18

Kerra Becker English

This story is the absolute worst. Abraham is the worst. God is the worst. We don't know what Sarah was doing at the time, but she's not exactly proven herself as an endearing mother. She named this kid – Laughter. He's their ridiculous punchline, the joke of the century, brought to them in their old age by a miracle of God. But wait – now God wants to take their miracle away – and for what? We don't know for sure. At least when we read about Aztec child sacrifices or other Mesopotamian cultures that believed in sacrificial killing for an exchange of God's favor, it was because they wanted promised fertility either in their families or through their fields; it's because they wanted victory in a battle, it's because they thought this would bring them great favor with God. But this reads more like a “do it because I said so” request, and Abraham seems to be willing to comply to show God his faithfulness and devotion. That's some twisted stuff right there.

Whatever happened to Abraham's willingness to challenge God's temper and violent tendencies? He was willing to argue with God over finding a few righteous folks in Sodom and Gomorrah, but when God asks him to kill his longed-for son, he says, “Sure, let me grab a few things.”

I've read up. There's no real way to redeem this story. There wasn't then, and I don't think we've come up with a way since. “Just kidding” is not an option. Saying God's justice is not like our justice, not an option. The ram was there all along. Still, not an acceptable excuse. We could say Abraham knew God well enough to know that God would provide an alternative. Maybe, but it doesn't quite seem that way. Now, I'd like to think that we've moved on, that we can honestly say that religion has put those kinds of practices aside. We don't have to please God with blood

sacrifices to prove our devotion. And yet, this story has an unfortunate ring to it, one that still plays out more than we'd care to admit.

If you look closely at the Christian narrative, particularly when it comes to our telling and re-telling of the Passion story, we've come around to saying in these last thousand years that God is making the very same request, but this time of his own son. There's a theme in Christianity that says, God sent his son, Jesus to be the sacrificial lamb, the ram in the thicket if you will. And it was with the popular rise of Anselm's treatise "Why Did God Become Human?" written in 1098 that the mood shifts from Jesus choosing to lay down his life to God sending his son to be the atoning sacrifice, because Anselm makes the feudal argument that you can't have forgiveness without a direct payment for sin. The Lord can't have his subjects thinking forgiveness is that easy, so God must have to do that for us as well. (Richard Rohr's daily meditation, Sunday July 23) That supposition infused Christianity thereafter with this violent image of God. Since we continue to use the Father/Son language that is familiar to us, it's not a stretch to say that God went one step farther than Abraham. He killed his very own son as a redeeming sacrifice.

No matter how long I practice this faith, that idea remains unsettling to me, and I love that there are voices in contemporary Christianity trying to take us back to the time before this became the driving metaphor. I can understand Jesus being willing to lay down his life out of love in protest of the "powers" that were discounting human life. I can understand Jesus having a close enough relationship with God to call him Father, and to pray for an alternative to his death that never came. To equate what happened to Jesus as child sacrifice equivalent sets us up for an ongoing narrative of abuse, and it is a horror that in many cases has become a defining tenet of our religion. How often have you been chided to believe in the love of God – BECAUSE God sent Jesus to die in your place? Have you ever asked, how exactly is that love? Richard Rohr asks it this way in his daily blog,

“Why would God need a blood sacrifice before God could love what God had created?” Or “What would God ask of me if God demands violent blood sacrifice from God’s only Son?” (Blog, July 23, 2017)

It’s a brutal understanding – from an oft repeated mythology. Sons and daughters, but most often first-born sons, have been sacrificed to God because it is the “most prized possession” to offer. And it turns out that somehow it is an even better gift if the sacrifice goes willingly – like Issac, and later, like Jesus. This theme turns up in far too many cultures to ignore – Greek, Roman, Viking, Mesopotamian, Incan and Aztec, just to rattle off a few.

So why exactly is the sacrifice of a son such a prominent theme in religious storytelling? What carries this story out of those dark ages and forms itself in the darkest corners of our own minds. How are children still being sacrificed to the gods? How are parents stealing life and vitality from their offspring? Because I think it’s still happening. We make Jesus into a God precisely because of this enduring mythology, and when I say mythology, I’m not saying that I think it’s not true, I’m using the scholarly term in which “myth” means a story that bears a divine truth. What are these stories (and sometimes practices) trying to teach us? Sacrifice becomes re-birth, and in that we confirm how we die to the old and regenerate in the new – whether that’s from generation to generation or within our own wounded spirits. Jesus IS God – because he was both chosen and willing to suffer on behalf of humanity. This is both heady and emotional stuff – stuff that takes a lifetime to unwind.

So let’s go back to the genealogy for a moment before we have to ask the really hard question, “Who is the God of Issac?” Just maybe it will help us out a bit. Issac is Abraham’s favored son. He’s fathered nations, and yet, Issac will inherit everything from Abraham, which as it turns out, is quite a lot according to biblical claims. And yet, the Issac story is the one given the LEAST

attention in this whole documentary of this family tree. We hear far more about Abraham and then we jump almost immediately to what's going on with Issac's sons – Jacob and Esau. What we know about Issac's adult life sounds like a repeat of some of the stories we can read about Abraham. We get another Abraham-focused story about how a wife needed to be found for Issac among his relatives, but then Issac also tries to pass his wife off as his sister in front of a King, just like Abraham did with Sarah. The description of his relationship with his children is that he's old and blind, and has a preference for Esau. Then he will get duped by Jacob and Rebekah to give his first-born's birthright to the younger son.

For being the chosen, favored son, Issac has a rather horrible life. Threatened to be killed by his father. Deceived by his wife and son. Living out almost the same life story as his father – but worse. Even though he wasn't killed by the blade, his life was drained from him. Maybe we know that part of the story TOO well as human beings. We know that life is tedious and short. We know that parents are destroying their children and children are deceiving their parents. So we long for a way to redeem the unredeemable. What helps us make a story of generational pain into a story of generational healing? These are the very same people who can either destroy us or protect us - who can call for the knife, or send a ram in our place.

We all probably have a few stories about how our parents made us feel lesser than. Even the really good parents mess up, and the less than good parents do damage that we find out is highly correlated with stress-related diseases, let alone a lifetime of heartbreak. And many times, our earliest understandings of God aren't that different from how we understand our parents. They are meant to be our life-giving protectors. They are supposed to love us completely and unconditionally, and we find out they are human, fallible, and sometimes not very good at offering us protection from the pain a human life can dish out. What if God is like that, and cannot be trusted?

That's the God of Issac! The God of Issac calls for his death. The God of Issac spares his life at the last second, or so it seems in this story. Could Issac possibly trust this God? I'm not counting on it. This is a God who can make us tremble in fear, not so much a God whom we can love. I feel sorry for Issac. In some ways, I feel like I recognize him in the eyes of children who have been wounded by abuse and neglect in their own homes. Continuing to tell those children that they must be afraid of their parents, of other adult authority figures, and of God is abuse multiplied. We owe the descendants of Issac a better story, an empowering story, a story in which life is brutal because that is real, but also a story in which the child can grow up to be the teller of their own story. Jesus owned his own story. Contrary to some rather popular beliefs, we should probably quit telling the story as though God sent him to die a violent death so that payment could be made for our sins. Through the work of Jesus, Christ redeems our sin, that part is true, but it was done by overcoming hate with love, and by dying to the understanding that the powers of the world owned him in mind, body, and spirit. The cross frees us from the powers that bind us economically, socially, politically, and even religiously. We are not beholden to those things. Let's quit acting like we are. Using the cross as a symbol to create more fearful children like Issac – is to turn a truth into a heresy. The God of Issac reminds us that religion has deep roots in both fear and love – but the God who deserves our worship, and who would never demand it, is the God of love. Ultimately that's where my loyalties lie. Amen.