

HEARING GOD
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(Genesis 22:1-14 NRSV) 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 don't know about you, but this is one of those stories in the Bible that I have a really hard time with.

Bill Moyers in his companion book to the PBS series on Genesis writes:
No story in Genesis asks harder questions. Would God make an unethical demand? Should we consider pious or crazy or both the father who puts a knife to the throat of his son because he's heard the voice of God telling him to do so? And why would the mother who waited so long and fought so fiercely for this child now fall silent as his

life is threatened?

I have read too many stories over the years of people, who like Abraham — thought that they heard the voice of God, and acted on it — sometimes causing death and destruction along the way.

Before we can try to understand what this story might mean to us today — we need to try to understand it in the context of Abraham's day.

Child sacrifice in the day of Abraham was a not all that unusual — most of the peoples that lived around Abraham would have practiced the ritual of sacrificing their first born child to please the gods.

And at this point, God had not made God's self clear proclaiming that child sacrifice was an abomination — that comes later in Leviticus. So for Abraham to believe that this was a command from God makes sense since the people in that day believed that to sacrifice a firstborn child to God would make the family and the tribe prosper.

But let me try to re-tell the story:

God speaks to Abraham and says:

Take your son (which son — I have 2 sons Isaac and Ishmael)
 your only son (both are only sons — one of Hagar and one of Sarah)
 the one you love (I love them both!!)
 Isaac (ah, the child of promise)

They begin on a three day journey to go to the land of Moriah — we really don't know where they went to. The book of Chronicles suggests that Moriah was the location of Araunah's threshing floor and that the Temple of Solomon was built over Araunah's threshing floor.

So maybe they went to the hill — the rock that is today the Dome of the Rock. But it really doesn't matter.

Can you imagine what that journey must have been like.

It is hard to know how old Isaac was — most of our images are of him as a little boy — but the text suggests that he was most likely a young man.

Isaac had to know that something was up when they did not bring a sacrificial lamb with them. — What was running through his head.

How about Abraham — what must have he been thinking about?

I cannot even imagine

And then, as they climb the hill, Abraham builds the altar and arranges the wood for the fire and then — then he ties up his son. Some Rabbinic stories suggest that Isaac was a willing participant in this event.

“Now, be sure to tie me up tight because I am really nervous, and if I tremble, and the knife slips, then the sacrifice will be improper. So tie me up well.”

I find that statement hard to believe, because of what happens next.

Just as Abraham is about to slit Isaac’s throat — Abraham hears the voice of an angel who tells him not to kill the boy and he finds a ram instead.

And that is where the lectionary ends with the story — but the story doesn’t end there.

Do you remember how it ends?

Abraham comes down the mountain with the servants that he brought with him — but where is Isaac?

Not only does Isaac not come down the mountain with Abraham, but we never hear of another conversation between them. The next time we see them together is when Isaac returns to bury his father.

To me, that in itself, tells of the terror that this event had to Isaac.

When Abraham returns home and Sarah sees him without Isaac she probably assumes that he is dead for Chapter 23 opens with her death, and Isaac nowhere to be seen.

This is a tough story!

The question is — what value does it have for us today?

The traditional view on this story — is that this is a story about Abraham’s faith. God had to test him to see if he really put God first.

Oswald Chambers whose writings have been condensed into a devotional book called My Utmost for His Highest writes about what he calls Abraham’s supreme climb. Chambers said,

“Abraham interpreted God’s command to mean that he had to kill his son and he could only leave this traditional belief behind through the pain of a tremendous ordeal. God could purify his faith in no other way.

If we obey what God says according to our sincere belief, God will break us from those traditional beliefs that misrepresent Him. If the devil can hinder us from taking the supreme climb and getting rid of our wrong traditional beliefs, about God he will do so. But, if we stay true to God, God will take us through an ordeal that will serve to bring us into a better knowledge of Himself."

Chambers goes on to say that the great lesson to be learned from Abraham's faith in God is that he was prepared to do anything for God. He was there to obey God, no matter what contrary belief of his might be violated by his obedience. Abraham obeyed in faith.

If that is the test of faith — then I will fail!
Because if I heard a voice telling me to kill my child I would walk away.

And what do we do to those who have said that heard God tell them to kill someone?

WE LOCK THEM UP!

The person who intrigues me in the story is not God, nor Abraham or even Sarah, but Isaac.

After this ordeal — after this terror — why does Isaac eventually come back to God and to the community.

Why would anyone want to believe in a God that tried to have him murdered!

Put another way — why does Isaac come back to faith?

My hunch is we all know Isaacs — they may be a child of ours, or they may be our spouse or a friend, or maybe even ourselves. Something has happened that makes them question whether they want to believe in a God who would cause terror in people's lives.

Norman Cohen addresses this issue in Bill Moyers Genesis roundtable.

Four years ago, our fifteen-year-old son was diagnosed with lymphocytic leukemia. I will remember, as long as I live, the first conversation I had with him in the pediatric oncology ward at Yale University Hospital. We were sitting on his bed after his testing, and he said, "dad, they tell me there's an eighty percent cure rate for lymphocytic leukemia in children my age. But what if I'm in the other twenty percent?" Whatever faith he had was being tested in terms of the rationality of the world. How could he summon the strength to know that the world is not all bad, that there are forces for goodness and wholeness that are in him and that can be brought to the surface?

Faith is the realization of this goodness that we can draw on so that we can continue living, even when faced with the greatest incoherence, the greatest despair.

In the midst of the terror of nearly being sacrificed Isaac does come back. And twenty three times the phrase “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” is used.

Isaac becomes the father of Jacob — and patriarch of the faith.

Does God test us like the story suggests?

I have come to believe that GOD does not test us — but life does. And how we respond makes all the difference in the world!

It took Isaac a long time to get over his anger at God and Abraham. I am not certain that he really ever got over his anger at his dad attempting to murder him.

The Biblical story suggests that something like 50 years pass between the Akedah (the binding of Isaac) and Abraham’s death. And there is no recorded interaction between the two of them.

But, eventually, Isaac decides to take his place as the leader of the community, and the promise that God made to Abraham is continued through his life.