

A HARD STORY ©

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Bloor Street United Church
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Sermon Notes for The Rev. Joyce Kelly - copyright

Based on Readings: Based on Genesis 22 and Luke 6 – see text at end

Today, we have before us a hard story. But isn't that what Lent is for? This is an archetypal story about our relationship with God, as surely as it is about Abraham.

First, the Biblical context. Years before, God told Abraham to go, with his wife, to a new land that God would provide. He did, and Sarah did, and God did.

They survived 3 famines – 2, when crops failed, and the 3rd, a different kind of famine – serious fertility problems. Sarah's, obviously, since, at her insistence, Abraham fathered a son, Ishmael, by Sarah's slave, Hagar – another hard story. You know how it goes: Sarah got jealous, and pushed Abraham to banish Ishmael and Hagar to the desert. And he did!

Eventually, when Sarah was 90 and Abraham 100, they had their own son Isaac (whose name means 'laughter.') Remember how Sarah laughed when 3 angel-strangers gave them the news that she would bear a son?

Abraham (whose name literally means 'God will provide') has faith that God will fulfill the promise – that, even in old age, he will father a great nation with (as the old promise says) "as many descendants as the sands of the seas and the stars in the sky," a male line – through Isaac, their miracle son – the very one God now tells him to sacrifice.

I

It happens this way. God initiates: “ABRAHAM!”

“I’M LISTENING” – the Hebrew word *hineini* translates, “Here I am.” (Sounds like burning-bush talk to me!)

And God’s angel calls, “ABRAHAM!”

“I’M LISTENING.”

“TAKE YOUR SON ISAAC WHOM YOU LOVE, GO TO THE LAND OF MORIAH, AND SACRIFICE HIM AS A BURNT OFFERING ON A MOUNTAIN I WILL SHOW YOU.”

Does Sarah know about this? Does she protest? God only knows.

Is there pain in Abraham’s heart – so great that it might break apart? God only knows.

Does he argue? No, he just splits some kindling, tells two servants “Road trip”, puts flint and knife in his own backpack (lest Isaac cut himself, I guess!), and treks off up a mountain.

This is Abraham – who railed against (what he thought was) God’s injustice for sin cities, Sodom and Gomorrah. “God, if there are 50 righteous amongst the wicked, will you spare the city?” “Yes, I will.” 40? 30? 20? “Yes” every time. “What about 10?” “Enough, Abraham. If there are even 10 righteous ones in Sodom and Gomorrah, I’ll spare the whole city.”

He knows how to protest against God!

But, it seems, he banished Ishmael to the desert without even a chat, and now he takes Isaac up the mountain – again, no protest.

Does he not argue because he walks close to God – or because he is apart? Is his quick response a sign of faith or foolishness?

Who can know God that well? God only knows.

Surely he must think it a harsh demand – but perhaps not ungodlike. Neighbours, Carthaginians, in times of national danger, sacrificed (by the 100s) children of the noblest families, hoping that by surrendering something of highest value, they could win the favour of the gods!

In our North American times of danger, we still sacrifice our children (by the 1000s) – in Afghanistan, Iraq – as precious as any noble’s child. Isaac is still being led up the hill, sometimes twisting hard, often just giving up, submitting. We bind him tight – by poverty, illiteracy – by all that restrains him from full life. We (humanity) lay him helpless on the wood. And we still hold the knife in our hands.

II

So what kind of test is this? Hebrew and Muslim and Christian scriptures are full of stories of people being tested/tempted – the word’s the same. Every Lent, Jesus’ 40 days in the wilderness brings us into the wilderness of ‘faith tested.’ All of us “people of the book” claim Father Abraham as our own.

Muslims say that Abraham sent his first-born son Ishmael (as prophet appointed by God) off into the desert, but that he did not go alone; faith went with him. The Koran, Ishmael’s Holy Book, says that God puts us in this world in order to test us; that our whole life is one big test. Muslims call Abraham ‘father of the faith’ - *Alhalil*, in Arabic, which means ‘supreme friend of God.’ This very night, as for centuries, devout Sunni Muslims will end their evening prayers with the *Prayer of Abraham*.

Jews, who have faced persecution in every century, have found comfort (and strength) from today’s story of ‘the binding of Isaac.’ As they watched their children led into cattle cars, they remembered they were Abraham’s children; they were not alone. Some went protesting, some not. The name *Israel* literally means, ‘*I have struggled with the Lord.*’

One young rabbinical student during the Vietnam War found no comfort in this old story. He seethed as fathers sent children off to war. “A bunch of us felt the same,” he said, “that if this trip into the mountains with Isaac was a test of Abraham, Abraham failed.” He wrote a poem that ended, “I like it best to think that Father Abraham said, ‘Forget it, Isaac; let’s go home.’”

But when Jesus was hanging on the cross, crucified by the evil side of human nature, God didn't say, "OK, Jesus, that's enough. Let's go home." No, God endures agony – until Christ Light is loosed into the world – for all people. *The Binding of Isaac*, owned by Muslim, Jew and Christian, is an archetypal story – God's and ours. Not a literal reality, it's an archetypal reality for all of our lives.

III

"FATHER," says young Isaac, "WE HAVE FLINT AND WOOD, BUT WHERE'S THE SHEEP FOR THE BURNT OFFERING?"

"SON, GOD WILL PROVIDE."

But Abraham has only the events of the day before him – as do we all. There's the Voice – and there's no denying that the Voice resonates in Abraham's soul.

There's a 3-day walk, dreadful preparation – Jesus had 3 years – uphill all the way. And there is Abraham – his very essence, *God will provide*. Abraham, who knows by faith that there is more going on than he can ever know, trusts that God is in charge.

And we believe that – don't we? God will provide. But what? Oh, that we might know – and in concrete terms, please God. For all our emphasis on God's available surrounding love, the Bible never shows a domesticated God who runs like a bellhop when we ring.

Always there is more Mystery – more unknown – than our mortal minds can grasp. Always there is a sense of a turbulent uncaged Presence, never fully accessible to even the most devout seer of any day. "My ways are not your ways," says a verse from Isaiah (55.8), "nor my thoughts your thoughts." It's not for us to say too soon where God's mercy begins or ends, what God approves or wants or not. Even to say the word 'God' is to distort the Mystery and reduce it to a size small enough to fit our mouths.

The test is whether (before confusing possibilities) we will remain faithful, trusting, before the high demands of God. God doesn't even know how it will come out!

Jesus, looking at the rich young man, loves him, hopes he will follow. But he doesn't.

Jesus knows what he is really like only after the test.

It is one thing to set out boldly for the Promised Land – as demanding as that is; it's another to keep faith in the Promise when all seems lost.

IV

THEY KEEP ON WALKING. THEN ABRAHAM BUILDS AN ALTAR, LAYS OUT THE WOOD, BINDS ISAAC, LAYS HIM ON THE PILE, and RAISES HIS KNIFE IN THE AIR.

God says to Jesus, "I have this thing I want you to do" – which Jesus lives with for a while ... until the bundle of sticks is piling up very high ... and the flint is stuck. "Father, take this away from me." But by morning light, "not my will but yours."

So Jesus goes to the pyre without resistance, the world's knife raised high in the air ... still in the air. God is still waiting to see, this day, what we will do ... if we will bring it down, and how, and when.

God says to us this day, "I have this thing I want you to do." The test, like Abraham's hand, remains suspended in air. God says to you (in the circumstances of your life), to this congregation, this city, country, world: "I have this thing I want you to do." And God waits for us to make our choices, to see if we are willing (first of all) to listen for God's high demands – and then meet them.

To Abraham, God says, "NOW I KNOW WHAT YOU ARE LIKE. DON'T LAY A HAND ON THAT BOY! NOW I KNOW."

V

And then there's God's intervention – that we pray for every day. How we bargain; how we plead. I wonder – do we miss God's action, because it's not what we expect, or recognize?

ABRAHAM LOOKS UP AND SEES A RAM CAUGHT IN A THICKET. HE SACRIFICES THE RAM INSTEAD OF HIS SON.

Rabbinic tradition says that the ram has been there from the sixth day of creation – survival and redemption available from the beginning. All Abraham had to do was raise his eyes from the mundane little scene before him, let go of his anxiety and fear, and let God. Glory lives at the edge of the mundane!

“Behold,” we say of Jesus, “The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” ABRAHAM NAMES THIS PLACE *GOD-YIREH* – “*God sees to it.*”

V

But does God *see to* that which we want most in all the world? Is ‘that which is beyond our worst nightmare’ really happening? It is – in cancer wards of children’s hospitals, under bombs, in childhood pleasure on ski hills and toboggan runs, when chaos breaks through our thin veneer of order. “Why, God, why?” parents still cry. Why so much pain?

Poet Wendell Berry says: “The Way of Pain” *Collected Poems*

For parents, the only way
is hard. We who give life
give pain. There is no help.
Yet we who give pain
give love; by pain we learn
the extremity of love.

I read of Abraham’s sacrifice
the Voice required of him,
so that he led to the altar
and the knife his only son.
The beloved life was spared
that time, but not the pain.
It was the pain that was required.

I read of Christ crucified,
the only begotten Son
sacrificed to flesh and time
and all our woe. He died
and rose, but who does not tremble
for his pain, his loneliness,

and the darkness of the sixth hour?
Unless we grieve like Mary
at His grave, giving him up
as lost, no Easter morning comes.

And then I slept, and dreamed
the life of my only son
was required of me, and I
must bring him to the edge
of pain, not knowing why.
I woke, and yet that pain
was true. It brought his life
to the full in me. I bore him
suffering, with love like the sun,
too bright, unsparing, whole.

The journey up the mountain, into the unknown, to the edge of unbearable pain, not knowing why we go! It's not what any of us want. We'd avoid it if we could. But, actually, we can't – for it is the human condition – and our high calling as descendants of Abraham, as Children of God – rich young rulers that we are before Christ. Can we do it – will we – that which is the hardest in the world, in our life?

Climb, climb – past the pain – into the Light. Climb, climb – through the hard reality of your day (there's no going around).

Climb, climb – listen, listen and pray – all the way through your hard story, into Christ Light.

It's a hard story for all us descendants of Abraham, but we need not fear – for we do not go alone. Christ is with us, who knows our path intimately, who has climbed above, and walks with us through all our days, with love like the sun, too bright, unsparing, whole - with Love That Will Not Let Us Go.

Thanks be to God. Amen

2-voice Reading from Genesis 22 & Luke 6
Read by Joyce Kelly and Bruce McLeod
from Eugene Peterson's contemporary, *The Message*

J God tested Abraham. "Abraham!"

B "Yes. I'm listening."

J "Take your dear son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I'll point out to you."

B Abraham got up early in the morning and saddled his donkey. He took two of his young servants, and his son Isaac. He had split wood for the burnt offering. He set out for the place God had directed him. On the third day he looked up and saw the place in the distance.

Abraham told his two young servants, "Stay here with the donkey. The boy and I are going over there to worship; then we'll come back to you."

Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and gave it to Isaac his son to carry. He carried the flint and the knife. The two of them went off together.

J Isaac said to his father, "Father?"

B "Yes, my son."

J "We have flint and wood, but where's the sheep for the burnt offering?"

B Abraham said, "Son, God will provide for the burnt offering." And they kept on walking together.

They arrived at the place to which God had directed him. Abraham built an altar.

He laid out the wood. Then he tied up Isaac and laid him on the wood. Abraham reached out and took the knife to kill his son.

J Just then an angel of God called to him out of Heaven, "Abraham, Abraham."

B "Yes, I'm listening."

- J “Don’t lay a hand on that boy! Don’t touch him! Now I know how fearlessly you fear God; you didn’t hesitate to place your son, your dear son, on the altar for me.”
- B Abraham looked up. He saw a ram caught by its horns in the thicket. Abraham took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son.
- Abraham named that place God-Yireh (God sees to it – or - God provides.) That’s where we get the saying, “On the mountain, God provides.”
- J The angel of God spoke from Heaven a second time to Abraham: “I swear – God’s sure word – because you have gone through with this, and have not refused to give me your son, your dear, dear son, I’ll bless you – oh, how I’ll bless you! I’ll make sure that your children flourish – like stars in the sky, like sand on the beach! And your descendants will defeat their enemies. All nations on Earth will find themselves blessed through your descendants because you obeyed me.”
- B Then Abraham went back to his young servants. They got things together and returned to Beersheba. Abraham settled down in Beersheba.
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- J And from Luke 10:
- B As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”
- J Jesus said, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: You shall not murder, not commit adultery, not steal, not lie about your neighbour, not defraud, honour your father and mother.
- B The man said, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.”
- J Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”
- B When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.
- J Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!”
- B The disciples were perplexed at these words.

J But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

Amen