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Road Trip! A Summer Sermon Series: Great Journeys in the Bible II. Somebody Say Something!

Genesis 22:1b-14 The Message God said, "Abraham!" "Yes?" answered Abraham. "I'm listening." He said, "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 that I'll point out to you." 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. Isaac said to Abraham his father, "Father?" "Yes, my son?" "We have flint and wood, but where's the sheep for the burnt offering?" Abraham said, "Son, God will see to it that there's a sheep 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. Just then an angel of God called to him out of Heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Yes, I'm listening." "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." 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). That's where we get the saying, "On the mountain of God, he sees to it."

One of the most important lessons that my seminary preaching professor taught me three decades ago is that every sermon – no matter how difficult or problematic or puzzling the scripture – needs to have a proclamation of the good news, the gospel. But there are some scripture texts where it just seems so very difficult to know what to say that would proclaim that gospel, that good news, because the text itself is so, well, awful. Today's scripture is one of those. It is the second in our summer sermon series using the motif of "road trips" to look at several examples of journeys throughout the Bible, and today's journey, with Abraham and his son Isaac trudging up that mountain, is one that more than one person has said to me over the years is an example of a

story that illustrates why they have trouble with believing in God - for this story seems to describe God as a cruel tyrant not the God of grace and love that we celebrate and worship Sunday by Sunday.

As I way into this oh-so-troubling "road trip," I want you to first imagine this story updated to today and as if it were reported, say, in the Gazette. I suspect such a rendering would go like this:

Associated Press: Colorado Springs, June 7, 2015. A man was arrested today after police received an anonymous tip about a bizarre religious practice that was about to take place. The man's son was freed by police as the father was in the act of wielding a knife over him. Police said the man told them he had heard the voice of God command him to kill his son. The boy was placed with Child Protective Services and the father is in custody pending examination by state psychiatrists.¹

I would confess that my reaction to this scripture has always been more like the way our imaginary newspaper reporter would write the story. And a preacher by the name of Sarah Buteaux begins her own sermon on this scripture with words that express my own feelings well:

If you do not attend [worship] services often, (perhaps you just happened to wander in this morning...) you may be sitting in a pew right now thinking that this is precisely why you avoid going to church. You may be secretly thinking to yourself that you are not sure which is worse, having to listen to this kind of twisted, abusive, misguided, patriarchal, rhetoric, or watching a well intentioned ...minister do her very best to ... contort this ancient story....²

What shall we say, then, in response to this awful story? Well, first, In order to struggle with this scripture we need to make sure we discard an attitude that is wrong and unhelpful. We sometimes tend to act as if the Bible was written as a whole by God last week, sent to Amazon.com for us to download to our Kindle app, and all we have to do is open it to any page to find a "moral" for our lives. But, my friends, that's the wrong

¹This idea and partial wording from http://www.lectionarysermons.com/Jun_27-99.html

²http://web.mac.com/revsarahb/Firstchurchhadley/Seventh_Sunday_After_Pentecost,_Year_A.html

way to approach the Bible. It's not helpful. It can and sometimes will distort the grace of God. Now, sometimes there *are* indeed clear principles, clear "morals," if you will, enunciated in scripture that are quite easy to see, even if they are enormously hard to follow: "*Love your neighbor as yourself.*" "*Do not do evil to those who hurt you, but turn the other cheek.*" "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and strength and soul.*" Those are profound, they are clear, they leap out at us and ought to guide us – and judge us when we fail to take them seriously. They are of a piece with what we know about God through the tender mercies of Jesus Christ.

But other texts are neither as clear nor as easy. And if we treat the Bible as if it were written in one-sitting, in modern-day English, all neatly divided up, or as if it were a computer program's source code where every line is of equal weight to every other line, we ignore the fact that the Bible's stories were actually first orally circulated and then written down over the course of almost four thousand years. Even the book of Genesis itself has at least three to five different accounts compiled over several centuries that were interwoven together at the time of the Hebrew people's exile in Babylon.

So, again the wise words of Rev. Buteaux:

The truth is some texts in scripture leave us with more questions than answers, and in this case, that is actually a good thing.... This is a story that is supposed to make you think, and rethink, and then think again. It is healthy to wonder, and wrestle, and even at times disagree, because for one thing ... it is ... ***a mark of how much you care***, and for another, the Bible isn't some sort of answer book, where you can just flip through the pages, pick a verse and divine a course of action for your life.³

Today's scripture is simply not a story where you can simply say, "*Aha! The moral here is to behave like Abraham*" And even though you may have heard sermons that told you exactly that, or seen bumper stickers that purport to make it all so "simple," it's just not that easy. Because this story confronts us with the question of whether indeed

³http://web.mac.com/revsarahb/Firstchurchhadley/Seventh_Sunday_After_Pentecost,_Year_A.html
Emphasis mine.

Abraham's behavior is something we **should** in fact imitate! But more importantly, if you come to this story with such a view of the Bible – that it offers simple “morals” and your job is to imitate its characters – you will turn God into a monster here. But if we know anything at all about God it is this: God is not a monster. God does not do things to His children that we would call evil if a human father did them to his children.

So where is the good news, the Gospel, in this story? Well, first of all, notice this: the story ends with Isaac **not** dying. He is **not** sacrificed. But in the time and place in which this story happened, that is **not** how the story would have ended if it had been written by Abraham's neighbors. For, you see, in the cultures of Abraham's time, child sacrifice was the rule rather than the exception. But for those faithful Jews who compiled this story during the Hebrew people's time of exile in Babylon, and for those who had handed the story on orally for two thousand years before that, the way this story ends is an ever-present reminder to the Hebrew people that child-sacrifice must never ever have any place in Israel's life and faith. Later in Israel's history, King Josiah destroys an altar which was used to sacrifice children because this was an **abomination** to God (II Kings 23:10). There is no stronger word in the Old Testament: **abomination** – despicable, hateful, so utterly wrong as to be beyond the pale. As preacher Edward Markquart puts it, “God hates child sacrifice.... [It] was detestable to God, abominable to God, a heinous sin to God.”⁴ Moreover, this story is not just a reminder to the long-ago Hebrew people; it is also a reminder that God wishes the death of **no** child; there is never **any** situation where it would be acceptable, much less right, to sacrifice children – even the children of the people whom we hate and despise and fear, and even the children of people who have hurt us. Children are never to be thought of, in that terrible modern phrase, as “collateral damage”; they are precious human beings whom God loves and wants to protect. Jesus, of course, was

⁴http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_a_what_is_your_isaac.htm

steeped in this tradition when he said that anyone who hurt or took advantage of a child would “*be better off dropped in the middle of the lake with a millstone around [his] neck*” (Matthew 18:6, adapted from The Message translation). And if you’ve ever seen a millstone – a huge grinding rock weighing hundreds, even thousands, of pounds, you know that Jesus was serious here!

Twenty years ago I encountered a sermon on this scripture by Rabbi Sandy Sasso. She is an eloquent preacher and a distinguished author; she and her husband co-ministered at an Indianapolis synagogue for over 30 years. She says this:⁵ “*What is most striking about this [story] is not what it says, but what it **does NOT say**, its long and painful silences.*” She points out that when Abraham receives this news of what he is to do with Isaac, he says nothing. He goes home to Sarah, spends the night with her, and says nothing to her. He gets up early the next morning so he can avoid talking to her. He takes two of his servants with him but, again, says absolutely nothing to them about what they are helping to accomplish. When Isaac says – a line that just makes you wince! – “*Father, we have flint and wood, but where’s the sheep for the burnt offering?*”– Abraham’s reply is terse: “*God will see to it.*” No explanation, nothing. As Rabbi Sasso says, “*the **silence** that pervades this story is foreboding... [and] all through this story I want to scream – ‘**Why doesn’t somebody say something?**’*” Only when God finally speaks – “*Don’t lay a hand on that boy*” – is Isaac saved.

And then Rabbi Sasso says this, and this is what has stayed with me all these years: maybe this story isn’t so much about sacrifice or obedience to God, but the Biblical authors wanting to teach all of us something about the need in our lives to talk, to communicate, **to say something**. Perhaps God was telling Abraham “*You must talk to me, you must talk to your wife.*” In a way similar to the way other rabbis down

⁵All quotes are from Rabbi Sasso’s sermon “Say Something,” prepared for Rosh Hashannah II 5754/1993 (in the Western calendar that is September 17, 1993), and what follows borrows very heavily from this sermon. I do not know if the sermon is published. I have a manuscript given to me by Rabbi Sasso. Emphases in all the quotes that follow are mine.

through the ages have commented on scripture, Rabbi Sasso imagines God saying this to Abraham:

Why didn't you speak to Me when I told you to sacrifice Isaac? I was waiting for your argument.... Faith does not mean blind acceptance.... Faith does not ask that you lose your head or your heart. It doesn't require stoicism nor a stiff upper lip. You spent an entire night with Sarah before you took Isaac up that mountain. Why didn't you speak to your wife about your plans? Isaac is her son, too. Did you think she might have objected, raised doubts...? ***That's what I had hoped but you never spoke.***

"That's what I had hoped for, but you never spoke." What sad and chilling words. And we know it's true: not speaking can sometimes destroy, can't it? What our story today doesn't tell is what happened after this terrible incident. Abraham returned back down the mountain with his two servants, without Isaac. I don't even have words for how Isaac must have felt, nor for the fact that, as Rabbi Sasso points out, throughout all those excruciating three days Abraham never even told his son he loved him. *He didn't even say that.* So Abraham ends up returning home without the son whom he has nearly killed. And not long after he does, Sarah dies. He never has the chance to speak to her, and so much was unsaid between them that needed to be said. Rabbi Sasso says then this, with words that every single one of us should take to heart: "How do **we** know which opportunity for dialogue will be our last? How can **we** be certain that if we fail to speak now, to tell another what is in our hearts, **we will ever have a chance to speak again?**"

My friends, is there something that **you** need to say to someone you love? Something that has wounded, that has festered, that has stunted? Or something that *will* stunt and hurt if it is not spoken about, talked through with love and respect and care, even if the subject may be hard and difficult? Is there something you need to say to *yourself*? Are there things that you know but refuse to acknowledge, refuse to speak to yourself about, which make your life more fearful, smaller, sadder, than it needs to be, than God ever wants it to be? Is there an apology you need to make? Rabbi Sasso

says that most “of us would rather visit the dentist than go to someone we have hurt and say, ‘I was wrong. I am sorry.’” Ouch. Does that shoe fit? I know it does me sometimes. Or do we have so much pride that we refuse to speak a word when we need *help*, when we are drowning and need a lifeline? Do you or I labor under that life-deadening notion that the people we love know (or should know) how we feel about them and therefore we don’t need to **tell** them that we love them?

My friends, if any of these folks are **you**, then take heart, take courage, and take action from these wise words of Rabbi Sasso: “We cannot change the story of Abraham and Isaac, but we can change the story of our lives; we can break the silence.” We can speak a word that can give life and hope. So, speak up. Say something, say something, say something!