

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
28 June 2020

Genesis 22:1-14

The true hero of the Akedah was the ram
Who did not know about the pact among the others.
It was as if he volunteered to die in place of Isaac.
I want to sing, for him, a memorial song,
About the curly wool and the mortal eyes
About the horns that stood silent on its living head.
After the slaughter, they were made into shofars
To sound the blast of their wars
And to sound the blast of their base celebrations.

I want to remember that final image –
Like a pretty photograph in a fancy fashion magazine:
The tanned, pampered youth in his finest of frocks
And by his side, the angel, dressed in a long silk gown
As if for a festive reception.
And the two of them, with desolate eyes,
Looking out to two distant desolate places.

And behind them, as a colorful background, the ram
Entangled in the thicket before slaughter--
The thicket, his final friend.

The angel departed homewards
Issac departed homewards
And Abraham and God had parted ways a while back.

But the true hero of the Akedah
Was the ram.

(Yehuda Amichai, <http://ktiva.blogspot.com/2006/11/poetry-of-akedah.html>)

This is a wonderful poem that in many ways captures a great deal of what the story of Abraham and Isaac is about. Let me start by saying that in Judaism the story of the near sacrifice of Isaac is called the Akedah or “the binding.” This story has been extremely important to both Judaism and Christianity for many centuries, even though It is a difficult story to tell and to preach. We can understand the story in a number of ways: We can say that this story marks the end of child-sacrifice in the liturgical life of Israel.

Understood this way, we can see the story as a natural progression in the liturgical life of a nation, from animism, to human sacrifice, to animal sacrifices. The focus of the story in this case is not so much God, Abraham, or Isaac, but rather the focus is the replacement of one form of worship with another form of worship.

This interpretation has some merit when you read the prophets and their very strong condemnation of child sacrifice: In Leviticus 18:21 God commands through Moses, “You shall not give any of your offspring to sacrifice them to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord.” In Jeremiah 7:30-31, the prophet states, “For the people of Judah have done evil in my sight... they go on building the high place... to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire—which I did not command, nor did it come into my mind.” Finally, Ezekiel 20:31 states, “When you offer your gifts and make your children pass through the fire, you defile yourselves with all your idols to this day...” The prophets strong condemnation of child sacrifice clearly indicates that this is a practice that has long been condemned in Israel, perhaps beginning with the “Akedah.”

There are other interpretations of this passage that are rich with theology. Kathryn Schifferdecker, a professor at Luther Seminary asks the following questions about this passage, “Is this a story of an abusive God, a misguided Abraham, religious violence at its worst? Or is it a story of faith and obedience?” (www.workingpreacher.org). These are important questions. For some, this is the story of an angry God that requires a pound of flesh from humanity. This story, which prefigures the story of Jesus’ sacrifice, is parental violence of cosmic proportions. We see here an abusive, capricious God who demands the sacrifice of a child to test the faith of a man who already left everything he once knew to follow him. Some who believe this interpretation ask, “Is God so insecure about his role as Creator that he demands these outrageous tests of his creatures to make himself feel better?” Is this the action of an insecure father who, after demanding this outrageous act, exclaims, “Look how much he loves me! He was willing to kill his own boy?”

For those who believe this story to be cosmic child abuse, let me say with the prophets I quoted above that God abhors child sacrifice or any type of violence against the weak, the defenseless, and the disenfranchised. Lord Rabbi, Jonathan Sachs, in his blog *Covenant and Conversation*, sees in this episode the birth of individuality in Judaism, or the idea that children are full moral agents from the ages of 12 and 13. They are not property of their father, as it was believed in antiquity. In this passage God wants to know if Abraham is willing to acknowledge that all children belong to God, and for this reason, all life is sacred. Sachs affirms that God asked for this sacrifice “to make clear to all future generations that the reason Jews condemn child sacrifice is not because they lack the courage to do so. Abraham is the proof that they do not lack the courage. The reason they do not do so is because God is the God of life, not death.” (<https://rabbisacks.org/binding-isaac-vayera-5775/>)

There are others who see the akedah as the story of a misguided Abraham who gets it totally wrong and who, at some point, felt the only way to please God was to sacrifice his own child. In this interpretation, Abraham resorts to violence as a way to please God, but then has an epiphany moment and realizes that child sacrifice is too high a price to pay to honor God. He then decides to replace child sacrifice with animal sacrifices at mount Moriah, the very same site of the future temple. For these interpreters then, this story prefigures the future Temple Sacrifices of Israel and, in a way, it prefigures the giving of the Law as well. There may be some merit with this interpretation, as we only see the word “Moriah” twice in the Bible, in this episode and in Chronicles where we are told that the site of the Temple was mount “Moriah.”

My friends, I am a Christian! Whether this episode narrates the end of child sacrifices in Israel or whether it prefigures the future Temple sacrifices that will come later, for me this is a story of faith. The author of Hebrews tells us, “By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom he had been told, ‘It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named after you.’ He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.” (Hebrews 11:17-19). To me, this is the story of a man who loved God so much, he was willing to offer the ultimate sacrifice in faith. He knew God was in control of his life and his destiny and that God could be trusted to provide for him and Isaac. Abraham knew the truth that is plain in Holy Scripture, some times God tests those he loves, but the test is never for God’s sake, but for the sake of the person being tested. It is for this reason that God sent his only son into the desert after his baptism. The testing was a preparation for ministry, it was basic training, it was discernment at its best. Abraham allows God to test him and because of his faith he became an example of righteousness and faithfulness to Jews, Christians and Muslims to this day.

I also believe this episode prefigures Christ. “The first century rabbis, with no connection to Christianity but with ample experience of Roman executions, said of this detail: “Isaac carries the wood for the sacrifice like one who carries his own cross.” (Schifferdecker, Ibid). In this episode, Isaac is seen as the model of obedience, silently carrying the wood for the sacrifice in the same way Christ carries the wood of the cross to the mountain of sacrifice. In absolute faith that God could be trusted, Jesus became the ram of the sacrifice. I agree with the poem i just read. The real hero is the Ram who silently offered his life. This is why I believe this whole episode points to the birth of Christianity on the cross. The perfect ram of Genesis 22 has come into the world and has willingly offered his life for us. This is why the Akedah is so important for Christians. The Akedah is the story of God’s love for humanity, it is the story of Christ himself. Today, let us give thanks for the faith of Abraham, but let us also give thanks that the perfect Ram has given up his life for us. Amen!