

On a Wild and Windy Mountain

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
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Genesis 22: 1-19

This week I was talking to our bookkeeper, Katherine, about the text for today and she asked me why I would ever choose to preach on such a text. And as the week advanced, I realized she had a good point. What was I thinking? For in many ways this is a horrible text. How do you preach about a story you don't even like? It is too disturbing, too challenging...in all honesty, I would simply prefer to ignore it.

And it certainly cannot do much for church growth. There may be those here today who don't normally attend church, or who have just been attending this church for a short while, still trying to figure out if this is the community of faith for you. And then, just as you are deciding that it might be safe to give this church thing a try, you come today and hear me read this rather unbearable story. Who could blame you for thinking that is precisely the kind of tyrannical, punishing, abusive, judgmental, patriarchal God you have spent years trying to get away from. And indeed, many of you who attend worship almost every Sunday may be thinking precisely the same thing. Who wants a God like that? So again, why bother to spend any time at all with this troublesome text?

A number of years ago, the film, *Crazy People*, was released. It told a story of inmates in a mental hospital who, through some strange turn of events, are given high paying jobs in the advertising industry. This happens because, being crazy, they know no better than to write ads that tell the truth. One of their advertisements reads, "We know you love him. But if he dies, wouldn't you like to have \$100,000 and a new Mercedes-Benz? John Hancock Life Insurance." The American public, having heard lies and half-truths for so long, hears these truthful ads as something strange and wonderful.

I wonder if something close to that might be happening in this admittedly difficult text. Could the uncertainty, the discomfort, we encounter here at least partly come from the experience of finding ourselves caught in the cross fire of a debate over what is truthful and real, over who or what is going to claim our loyalty and our lives?

Retired United Methodist Bishop, William Willimon, shares a story from his days as a parish minister. Another Sunday had come much too fast, as they often do. He was running around early in the morning trying to think of something to do for that day's adult Sunday school class. He found a film, a video cassette from "The Genesis Project" series – which really were quite good films. This one told the story of Abraham and Isaac and God up on Mount Moriah. He wondered how his congregation of sophisticated, educated, often skeptical adults would respond to such a strange story, even in video form. He says, "I assured myself that it was only a little Bible story. What harm could it possibly do?"

The group watched silently as the story unfolded. The dialog was in Hebrew with English subtitles. What an austere sight it was to see old Abraham struggle up the windswept, dusty mountain, knife under his coat, with his son trudging silently behind him. Finally the bronze blade is raised, the boy's black eyes flash with horror, then a voice speaks, the knife is stayed, the ram cries from the thicket, and it is over.

Says Willimon, "The group sat there in what seemed to me to be a stunned silence when the video ended. I rather nervously attempted to begin the post-video discussion. It wasn't easy. I sounded defensive, was talking too much, giving them a bit of historical background. They listened in awkward silence.

" 'But what does this old story mean to us?' I finally asked. 'That's the question. I daresay we moderns are a bit put off by the primitive notion that anybody would think that God wanted him to sacrifice his child like this. Can this ancient story have any significance for us?'

" 'God still does require it,' interrupted a woman, an older woman, hair graying, hands nervously twitching in her lap. 'He still does.'

" 'How?' I asked.

"Quietly, with tears forming in her eyes, she said, 'We sent our son to college. He got an engineering degree. But he got involved in a fundamentalist church, married a girl from that church. Then they had a baby, our only grandchild. Now he says God wants him to be a missionary and go to Lebanon. Take our baby, too.' She began to heave to and fro, sobbing."

"The silence was broken again, this time by a middle-aged man. 'I'll tell you the meaning this story has for me. I've decided that I and my family are looking for another church.'

" 'What?' I asked in astonishment. 'Why?'

“ ‘Because when I look at that God, the God of Abraham, I feel I’m near a real God, not the sort of dignified, businesslike, Rotary Club god we chatter about here on Sunday mornings. Abraham’s God could blow a man to bits, give and then take a child, ask for everything from a person and then want more. I want to know that God.’

“After the class had ended and the group filed out of the room, my wife and I sat here for a stunned moment, and then silently began winding up the extension cord and putting away the chairs. ‘What on earth was all that about,’ I finally asked. She knew no more than I. But by then, the wind had died down, the bleatings of the ram could be heard no more, and Father Abraham had gone back down the wild mountain, leaving us on the flattened plain of middle-of-the-road, reasonable religion.”

Concludes Willimon, “How odd that we who make our home and plant gardens under the shadow of the mushroom cloud, who regularly discard our innocent ones in sacrifices to much lesser gods than Abraham’s wild and restless God, should look condescendingly upon him. No stranger to the ways of the real God or to facts of real life, Abraham would at least know that a mad, disordered, barbaric age needs more than a faith whose only claim is that its god can be served without cost. How puny is our orderly, safe religion before the hard facts of life.”

Why am I preaching this sermon? Do I believe in a God who demands child sacrifice as a sign of obedience and faithfulness? Absolutely not! Do I believe in a God who orders people to strap a bomb around their waist, walk into a crowded shopping district and detonate the bomb? Absolutely not! That simply is not the God whom I worship. So what is it that attracts me to this challenging story?

Well, in part, perhaps I feel a bit like the man who, after meeting the God of Abraham, the challenging God of Mount Moriah, said he wanted to know more about this God – a God who both provides and tests, who is trustworthy and demanding, gracious and unpredictable. How tempting, even comforting, it is to create God in our image; to come here and worship a God who is much like me, sharing my values, my politics, my likes and dislikes, who is reasonable and rational and relatively harmless...yes, much like me.

But how about an unconventional God who refuses to bend to our definitions of what is rational and reasonable, a God who is a free lord who comes and goes as he will, who refuses to be domesticated or give in to our easy faith of complacency and accommodation, who insists upon a moral reality that cannot be evaded, cannot be outflanked by policy, cannot be outvoted by popular opinion, who can turn us and all that we know inside out and upside down. Are we ready for such a God...an unconventional God who intends us no conventional life?

Remember those people writing ads that challenged everyone’s concept of what is real...what is normal? A college chaplain shares this: “I know a sophomore. Came here last year all buttoned down, sure of himself. Your average, high SAT-scoring, hyper-achieving freshman. He got turned upside down, inside out, one evening here at the chapel. Messed him up for good, as far as I can tell. Gave up a sophomore summer in Vail to build houses for poor people in Americus, Georgia. To most of the rest of the campus, that’s called odd. Here in the chapel, we call it normal.”

Let me say again...child sacrifice is an abomination, and in this day and age we cannot imagine worshiping a God who would demand it or would affirm someone for agreeing to do such a thing. Obedience to the point of immorality or cruelty is not what we are called to do, and it’s not what God wants from us. Let there be no doubt about this.

But having said that, I must confess that for me, there is still something compelling about the wild and restless God of Abraham, the God who is not afraid to call us out of our comfort zone and challenge us with a new reality, a new normal, a new way of being in the world.

Yes, I hope Sunday worship can be a source of comfort and renewal for you. And yet I also hope that it can be a time when our accepted concepts of what is real and normal are thrown into disarray, where we find ourselves exposed to a compelling and demanding power that wrenches us loose from our firm grip on the status quo and opens us to a new world, a power that summons every one of us to transformation. Life is offered in this text, but it is not offered easily or cheaply. For hard truth is not if we will give our lives, but to whom will we give them. And it remains so very tempting to offer up ourselves on lesser altars before smaller gods.

And so, it would seem, God always wants to know...just who are my people, who is serious about faith, and in whose lives can I be most fully God – ultimately giving good gifts which cannot be explained or even expected.

Words of Margaret Farley, commenting on this text, “Faith leads us through valleys of darkness and into the shadow of death. But all the while, it leads into life, and it knows the ways not only of sadness but of joy. By it we are carried into God’s own life; in it we can find one another; through it we come home even to ourselves.”