

The Sacrifice

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Genesis 22: 1-19

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There's a tradition, especially in Judaism, of conversing with sacred texts. Sometimes the conversation is appreciative, sometimes critical, sometimes argumentative. It's sort of like Tevye in "Fiddler on the Roof," conversing with God, letting God know that he appreciates the fact that the Jews are the chosen people, but despite the honor, and considering the persecution of God's chosen people throughout history, couldn't God choose someone else sometimes. The next four sermons explore this approach to four great texts from Genesis.

There are days as a professor when your students make you feel so proud, when you think to yourself, *"The church is in great hands with pastors like these."*

This was not one of those days.

I was teaching a seminar on biblical interpretation and the practice of ministry in the Doctor of Ministry program at Austin Seminary. It was maybe twenty-five years ago. I'd asked the students (all pastors) to read carefully and respond pastorally to the text we just read, from Genesis 22, the story of Abraham's "Sacrifice of Isaac," the classic Hebrew story referred to as "the Akeda."

My students' responses were mind-numbingly typical of people who have been engaged so long in the preaching profession that they no longer think like normal human beings, and no longer respond naturally to a biblical text that is graphically, unspeakably offensive. They theologized and spiritualized and abstracted this story to the point that I was ready to pull my hair out. But, instead, I sat there listening to their interpretations until they were all done. And when they were finished, they looked at me like cats proudly dropping a dead mouse at the back door, as though that rat was an offering holy enough for Jehovah himself.

Slowly, I began to speak, and as I spoke, I built up steam: *"What parent,"* I began, *"when his child comes and asks for bread, will give his child instead a stone." Jesus asked that question. And, yet, not one of you has questioned the insanity and evil of a father taking his child to a mountain to rip open his chest because he believes God wants him to. Not one of you has questioned the character of such a man who would do such a thing, or the character of such a God who would test a person in this manner. I can only say that if you were my father or my mother, I'd sleep with one eye open."*

The class was stunned. They thought they had responded perfectly because they had responded as expected of preachers. But I wanted them to respond like human beings.

I wanted these pastors to respond the way Elie Wiesel, the poet-chronicler of the Holocaust had responded to the same story when he wrote: *"Slaughterer and victim looked into each other's eyes and for one moment all of creation held its breath."* I wanted them to be able to put enough distance between themselves and the biblical text that they could respond the way a father or mother would respond in the world we actually inhabit. I wanted to hear them say, like Wiesel,

*"I have never really been able to accept the idea that inhumanity could be one more way for [a human being] to move closer to God."**

"Let us not speak falsely now, the hour is much too late," Bob Dylan sang, long before a Nobel Prize ennobled him. Too often we have turned the truth of scripture into falsehood by honoring its message in a way that dishonors our humanity and God's character.

Abraham sacrificed Isaac. He did, you know.

Abraham sacrificed his child. They went up the mountain together, father and son, but as Jewish sages observed long ago, Abraham and Isaac did not come back down together. Every page of Abraham's story is the story of a man of faith wrestling with God. Not so with Isaac. When it comes to his faith Isaac is the silent patriarch. How could he not be? How could this man ever fully trust the God of his Father Abraham? Abraham has sacrificed Isaac for his faith. And I'll bet Isaac always slept ... and I'll bet he always prayed ... with one eye open. If Abraham is the original seeker, Isaac is the patron patriarch of all those who have been wounded by religion.

I was recently on a North Carolina mountain in a retreat with a bunch of people many of whom had experiences of Christian faith that left them wounded. One was haunted by a stick-wielding nun she'd known at Catholic school. Another by the memory of an abusive father who tried to beat the devil out of him. They spiritually ached, but still they were drawn in the Spirit's tethers up the side of that mountain and into days of intensive meditation and contemplation. God only knows how they find the courage to keep coming back. And I wondered how many of them had encountered good-intentioned Christians who champion things done by some biblical hero that if done by the guy next door we would call the police.

It is very likely that this story about Abraham and Isaac was intended to teach Israel that human sacrifice does not please God. The story is the story of a zealously faithful old man who got his wires crossed.

"Let us not speak falsely now," not just because "the hour is late," but because there's so much at stake.

Our children, neighbors, friends, family deserve to know that the God we trust is trustworthy, and that however often we fail to love well, God never fails to love. And God would never *ever* ask us to sacrifice any human being, and certainly not to prove our faith.

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- Elie Wiesel, "Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits & Legends" (New York, 1976), pp. 87 and 104.