

Sermon for June 25/26, 2011, Proper 8A

What kind of God would ask for the sacrifice of an only son? What type of demented, power hungry, God would demand that the gift he gave be taken away? What type of God would call a person to serve and then demand that everything be given up? What type of God is that? What type of love is that? That cannot be our God. Our God is the one who fed five thousand, who converted Saul, and who helped Moses through the Red Sea. Our God is one of saving, of transformation, and of forgiveness. That's our God. How can our God and the God in this story be the same?

There are three major scenes in this story and they all revolve around Abraham answering with Here I am. Scene one is between Abraham and God. Abraham and God have been through a lot together already when we get to this chapter in Genesis. A chapter ago God's promised gift happens and Abraham and Sarah's son Isaac is born. As Isaac grew, he started to play with his half-brother Ishmael, and then Sarah decided that he had to go. So Abraham has to make Hagar and Ishmael leave. That was in the book of Genesis before we get to today's lesson and now we hear where it seems that God is test Abraham and we begin to become more and more uncomfortable.

God tells Abraham, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about." There is no doubt within this part of scripture. There seems to be no second guessing from Abraham. The next day he got up and went. The only comment that Abraham gives is "Here I am." There are no questions like, "God, are you sure you are talking about Isaac? Didn't you just give him to me and now you want me to kill him as a burnt offering to you? God this doesn't make sense. I'm not following your train of thought." Instead Abraham gets up, saddled his donkey and takes Isaac and two servants with him on the journey.

In the next scene Abraham tells his servants to stay back while he and Isaac go up the mountain to worship. As they start to make the journey up the mountain Isaac looks around and knows something is missing. Usually when you do a burnt offering there is a lamb, some birds, something that you offer to God but there is nothing here. He calls out to his Dad, and what is Abraham's response? "Here I am." Isaac questions the whereabouts of this sacrifice and all Abraham can say is, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." God will provide.

Can you imagine if Abraham had tried to explain the situation to Isaac? Can you imagine looking your beloved son in the face and saying, "I know ever since you were born I have told you that you were God's gift to me and your mom. I know I told you that God promised you would come and even though I didn't believe him, God fulfilled his promise and you came into our lives. You are my cherished son. You are my beloved and now God is asking me to sacrifice you. Isaac...you are the lamb." Those words would be impossible to say.

Some years ago I sobbed heavily as I left my son behind on his swearing-in day for the military. I knew he didn't belong with me anymore. And then a few years later after he graduated from the military academy, I helped to move him to his first apartment as he began his military career. I wanted to do everything possible within my strength and resources to protect him, to help him make a home, a place to comfort him, protect him, secure him. I am hardwired in every single cell of my body to protect my children in any way I can. I could not let my son go off on his own in life until I knew, even if in just a small way, that he would be ok. I thought there is no way I could do what Abraham did. There is no way I could hold a knife up to my only son and be ready to sacrifice

him because God asked me to. I could sacrifice myself for my son but never my son for me or anyone else. That's just never going to happen.

In the third and final scene of today's story, Abraham has built the altar, stacked the wood and is ready for the sacrifice. He takes his son. He binds him. He lifts him up and places him on the wood. The scripture tells us nothing about Isaac's reaction to these events. We don't know if Isaac looks up at his father with tears in his eyes asking the question...why? Why dad...why? All we get is a close up of this intense moment as Abraham takes out the knife, raises it up, and takes aim at his son. I can't begin to imagine what was going on in this scene.

Human sacrifices are something all modern societies frown upon. When we think of human sacrifices we usually have this image of an ancient Aztec tribe which offers a young woman up to the gods. Or we get the image of Indian Jones and the Temple of Doom, when the poor nobody is strapped into a cage and sent down into the belly of a fiery beast. Then you have the image of Fay Wray, or more recently Naomi Watts, being tied up to pillars for King Kong to play with as the islanders all chant and bang drums.

In this picture there are no drum beats or chanting natives. There is no huge monkey coming out of the woods. There is only a father and a son, an altar and a knife in the air. Just as Abraham is mustering up the courage to force the knife into his son, he hears, "Abraham, Abraham." And in a moment which must have been of shock and relief, Abraham answers, "Here I am." In this final response Abraham's wishes and hopes are fulfilled as God provides a ram, stuck in a thicket, to take his son's place. In the last verses it simply states that Abraham called the mountain, "The Lord will Provide." There is no talk about how Isaac felt has his father untied him or how the journey home went. We are left with only the realization that God once again kept his promise and provided even though we, the readers of this ancient story, always wonder what would happen if the angel never showed up. We do know that Isaac carried his father's faith in God forward.

This story makes us feel a little uneasy about God. What kind of God would ask for the sacrifice of an only son? What type of demented, power hungry, God would demand that the gift he gave be taken away? What type of God would call a person to serve and then demand that everything be given up? What type of God is that? What type of love is that? That cannot be our God. Our God is the one who fed five thousand, who converted Saul, and who helped Moses through the Red Sea. Our God is one of saving, of transformation, and of forgiveness. That's our God. How can our God and the God in this story be the same?

After 9-11 happened, I talked with a member of the military that served in World War II. In that conversation we had prayed for all the people who died at the hands of a few. After we prayed, she told me about an old friend whose name was Duncan. Duncan and my friend had grown up in England together. Duncan was a conscientious objector in World War II and stood up for peace all his life. He had contacted her after 9-11 and in the midst of that conversation he had said to her, "Well now, the tables are reversed. How do you feel about all the people who died at the hands of your country? What about all those who were killed when the bombs were dropped in Japan?" She had trouble answering him and his words lingered with her, so I invited her to bring his questions into our bible study group that week. She did.

Bob, a World War II veteran in the same study group said, "The bombs were worth it. They saved the lives of thousands of Americans and British soldiers." It made me wonder if the sacrifice of a quarter of a million Japanese citizens was worth it to end the war and save the lives of soldiers? I

still don't know how to answer that question. It seems that whatever the answer is, that it's all about sacrifice. Real sacrifice.

What makes sacrifice worth it?

Does the killing of a son make up the perfect sacrifice worthy of our God?

I've come to think that the answer is yes.

Yes, the killing of a son makes up the perfect sacrifice worthy of our God. I have heard sermons about our ancient story for today's first lesson from Abraham's perspective and from Isaac's but I have often wondered what God was thinking throughout this event. What if God responded to me by saying something like this: "the only way things will ever be right is through an ultimate, the final, sacrifice. The ultimate sacrifice is one of a father giving up his only son. There is nothing higher." And so God continues to think outloud: "Abraham is a great person and I am proud he has such strong faith in me. I asked him to sacrifice his beloved son to ease the pain of humanity. I'm going to have him make everything right. Then my covenant will be fulfilled, his ancestors will be greater than the stars because they will come through Isaac to get to me...wait.(wait a minute God says and God thinks more about this plan) wait, this isn't right. It shouldn't be Abraham who sacrifices his son---it should be me...I love the world so much that I should send my only son."

And if I could imagine the rest of the story in this dilemma between me and God, I think it would go like this: God, in the creator father role, tries to think up a way to make everything right again because sacrificing Isaac just doesn't make sense. God knows that is inconsistent with who God is. So God asks the question, "who will I send?" Then God's son, the second part of the Trinity, the one sitting at God's right hand, the one we call Jesus, speaks up with just a few words, "Here I am, send me."

And those words were made flesh and dwelled among us.

And then we learn that the region of Moriah where Abraham and Isaac were together at the altar and with the ram is really present day Jerusalem. And we sit back and think again about God, our God.

For God never asks us to do something that God wouldn't be willing to do. God does provide to save, transform and forgive. God is the provider because God never *ever* again asked someone to give up their son. When I see my own grown children's eyes I know that I will never be asked to offer them up to appease God. I know this because God decided to take this ugly and painful human practice of sacrifice and stop it once and for all. God took the responsibility for sacrifice head on. God the Father is the one that hundreds of years after testing Abraham, stood by and had to listen to his own son call out.

All this for us.

God's son equaled the perfect lamb. For you, for me, for all eternity.

And all God's people said...*Amen. Thanks be to God.*