



Seeing and Being Seen: This Is a Test

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Genesis 22:1-14, 19
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I don't know about you, but this scripture passage makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up straight. These are indeed some of the most startling and disturbing words in the Bible: "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt-offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you." This is one of those passages in the Bible that makes me uncomfortable to say "the word of God, for the people of God." Because how can we give thanks to God for a story about child sacrifice? How can we not feel uncomfortable about a story in which God commands God's most faithful follower—the father of three major faith traditions today—to kill his beloved son?

Week after week in this sanctuary we talk about and worship a God of love and justice and grace and endless mercy. We praise and seek to emulate a God who lifts up the most vulnerable in this world, who willingly entered into human vulnerability just to be reunited with us. And this story of near child sacrifice dares me to question: how can that God also be this God?

While much of our Christian tradition has tried to make excuse, or redeem, or even glorify this passage: Phyllis Tribble calls this one of many "texts of terror" in the Bible: stories of abuse, exploitation, and violence against the most vulnerable and not only without divine intervention but often occurring because of divine culpability. Stories that explaining away and making excuse for actually does more harm than good. Stories that ask us to be stirred up, challenged, and uncomfortable to glean how it might be included in our tradition today. This morning I am finding myself very uncomfortable with a God who tests, a God who knew all along that Isaac would have been spared. I'm not comfortable with a faith that makes violence redeemable, even if it's our God who asks for it. I want a God who sees the wrong happening here. A God who speaks up for the victim rather than advising the abuser. I want a God who sees through the lens of relationship rather than hunting for a sacrifice to be appeased. We have taken an ancient story about a faithful man and a very questionable act, and through the help of the church have assumed that this story has to do with our faithfulness, and that ultimately violence has a part to play. But what if we've got it wrong, and this story is not a description of faithfulness at all? What if, instead, this is a story about failure. What if, for centuries we have been wrong in assuming that Abraham passed this test?

This whole thing never really began with a test in the first place, it began with a covenant. A covenant in which God promises to the patriarch formerly known as Abram and his wife Sarai that they will bear a son even in their old age, and that the generations to come would outnumber the stars. A covenant so transformative that their names would be changed to Abraham and Sarah. While this covenant in God's mind was a promise of cooperative relationship, it became distorted in Abraham's mind as a promise for ultimate power. We see the hopes of this partnership-covenant played out when Abraham argues and bargains with God to spare the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham inquired if God would spare the city if he could find 50 righteous people in Sodom, to which God agreed. When Abraham couldn't find 50, he asked

what about 45 people, 40, 30, 20 and finally what about 10 people, God? Not only does God allow this back and forth debate from Abraham, God responds to it, being open to dialogue and partnership. And that makes Abraham's silent, unquestioning obedience when asked to sacrifice his son Isaac even more disturbing, Abraham does not bargain or plea, or refuse. Though God calls on "Abraham," it seems that the man who responds is still Abram, the man who had not yet encountered the relational, conversational God of the covenant. In refusing to speak, Abraham essentially denies sacred relationship with God.

It makes me wonder if just maybe what God is testing in this story is not Abraham's obedience, but the understanding of their relationship. A relationship that Abraham had already done some pretty terrible things in the name of: like giving his wife Sara to a king lying that she was his sister; kicking out Hagar and Ishmael when Isaac finally arrives; and now in our story this morning, Abraham is taking Isaac to the top of Mt. Moriah to sacrifice him to ensure the power that God has promised him. Instead of a test of obedience, maybe this is instead God providing an opportunity to end the volatile cycle that Abraham has started. Maybe God wants to see Abraham challenge such an uncharacteristic demand on behalf of his people. Maybe God wants Abraham to stand up and say no. No, I will not sacrifice this child whom I and you love. No, this covenant we made will not be defined by violence, but by relationship. Perhaps if we as modern receivers of this story begin to see it as a test in which the right answer is to protect an innocent child rather than sacrifice him, our world might be a bit different, perhaps for the better.

I know it would have been much different for those whose phone calls I answered while working at a crisis center for victims of Domestic Violence and Sexual assault. While working there, part of my role included working a shift on the 24-hour crisis hotline and that's where I spoke with a young man we'll call Sam. Sam was an only child who had recently left home to go to college... leaving a house that outwardly displayed his family's wealth and promise, yet a home that no one knew the trauma that was taking place inside. What people couldn't see is that behind the front doors lived a volatile family system, run by an emotionally and physically abusive father. Sam shared that being bullied by his father was a tradition passed down from generation upon generation. His father's father had run his household that way, so his father also parented that way, and now Sam was terrified he would inevitably hurt someone he loved too. He was terrified he would turn into his father, he could feel the rage rising within him sometimes, as if the hunger for power and control had been embedded in his DNA. "But I want something different for my life," he shared, "I want to stop this cycle that has gone on for too long in my family. I want to walk a different path than my father did, and his father before him did. I want to know that a different kind of life is possible. I want a different way to be in relationship with others and myself." I told him I thought his questions were brave and that it sounded like he was already on a new path than the one his family had laid before him.

Isaac also wanted to break the cycle, he wanted to know a different life was possible, he wanted to know of the covenant that God had made was indeed true. When we talk about Isaac, when we listen to Isaac—this story can speak to us in a powerfully different way. After all, it is Isaac who questions Abraham about where is the lamb for sacrifice, whose knowledge of God allows no room to conceive of inhumane cruelty or abandonment. It's Isaac who calls on his father's

conscience and draws attention to the relational stakes of the situation. And it is Isaac who—having been spared—climbs down off the altar changed, and while not necessarily for the better, the trauma must have felt debilitating, he too was headed in a new direction than his father had laid out for him. In fact, there is a Jewish Midrash, which is a type of interpretation of the biblical text, that claims that Abraham came back down the mountain to meet his servants to go home and the next thing that happens is that his wife Sara dies. While this moment was the climax of Abraham's story, for Isaac it was the beginning. The Midrash suspects that Isaac never again spoke to his father and instead went down the other side of the mountain, charting a new path for himself.

When we talk about Isaac, when we follow Isaac—this story can speak to us in a powerfully different way. It suggests a God for whom intimate relational dialogue and true knowing are the cornerstones of faithfulness. It suggests a God who stakes everything on the vulnerable, marginalized, and discounted and on our capacity to speak up for justice and mercy. And it challenges us to consider that, perhaps, if we are looking for leaders in faithfulness—we might just be looking in the wrong place. When we acknowledge that there are still Isaacs in this world—when we see and hear them and learn to hear the story through their perspective, we must also confront the ways in which we are still the silently obedient Abraham. But just as God was far from done with Isaac on that altar, God is far from done with us. When God told Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son, the living embodiment of the covenant, I think God was waiting for an answer. Abraham gave silent obedience, but I think God wanted something different—something more—from him, and I think God wants something more and different from us too.

And so maybe for us, the answer God is waiting for begins here... at this table. A table in which a covenant is not only remembered but shared in abundance. A table in which we remember that God through Jesus knew of violence and brokenness and stood up and said: "NO!" this is not what you are defined by, this is not how I see you. It is here at this table that we are nourished to walk a different way down the mountain, charting a new way to be in relationship with each other, breaking the cycles of violence that swirl around us and turning them into covenants of peace and love. It is around this table that we may arrive as Abraham blind with power, yet we leave as Isaac transformed to live out a different way in the world.

May we listen and respond and learn and grow. May we dare to trust. May we rejoice in the God that does not abandon, who welcomes dialogue and challenge, who cultivates hope in unexpected places, and who calls us all into sacred relationship with God and one another.

Amen.