

Given what we heard from Scripture last week, this morning's sermon could well be called "Beware of Biblical Family Values, Part Two." Thankfully, the ancient story that we heard from Genesis this morning, the story of Isaac nearly being sacrificed, has a happy ending. But beyond that, there doesn't seem to be much else to commend this story to our attention. This story is so familiar to so many that I suspect a lot of us just overlook how brutal it is.

As you may know, this same story is also sometimes used during the Good Friday liturgy, which adds a layer of troubling theology to an already difficult story. I do think some good theological reflection can help us here. But let's not hurry past the story itself too quickly. Like many other people of faith, I often do precisely that, especially if the story makes me feel uncomfortable.

Let's recall what we've been hearing from Scripture over the last few weeks, which has set the stage for what we heard this morning.

Responding with trust to a mysterious call from God, Abraham uprooted himself from his homeland to journey into the unknown. He stumbled over a number of roadblocks on the way, yet continued to cling to God's promise that he would found a nation of blessing as populous as the stars in heaven.

When Abraham and his wife, Sarah, reached old age, well beyond their child-bearing years, God made good on that promise by surprising them with a son, Isaac, whose name means "laughter." We can only imagine not only the delight but also the challenges that child brought into the lives of a geriatric couple. At long last, Abraham must have thought, the trust I put in God's word so long ago, in the land of my youth, has come to fruition.

It is this very same God who then asks Abraham to sacrifice Isaac in today's story. Can any of us really imagine that? I know of no parent I consider admirable who would do this, or even entertain such a possibility. And I know of no child I would consider sane who would willingly be offered on an altar of sacrifice with no complaint or objection. And I find it quite unsettling to suppose that God would intentionally put Abraham and Isaac (not to mention Sarah) through this kind of ordeal.

Others have found it troubling, too, and have tried to find some kind of religious rationale for it. In both Paul's letter to the Romans and in the Letter to the Hebrews, for example, Abraham is presented as a model of faith, as someone who *passed the test* God had given him. Yet I have to wonder: is this really the kind of God in whom we want to place our trust, a God who might at any moment confront us with a gut-wrenching challenge merely and only to discern the depth of our faith?

Imagine one of your dearest friends or your spouse arranging an elaborate scenario just to test your love and affection. I think that would be a relationship in some bit of trouble. To be clear, I do not mean our faith is never tested; my faith is tested quite regularly. But I just cannot imagine God sets it up that way deliberately, like a trick question on a final exam.

Still other modes of interpretation layered over this story are just as unsettling, if not more so. Some early Christian commentators created a link between this story from Genesis and the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, which is why this story is sometimes read on Good Friday. In

the second century, for example, Clement of Alexandria wrote that “Isaac was the son of his father, Abraham just as Jesus was the son of his father in heaven. Isaac was a victim,” Clement continues, “just as Jesus was.” And Clement is by no means unique in his approach to this story.

Quite honestly, I’m not sure which makes me more uncomfortable: the story itself or these theological spins on the story. Is the idea of Abraham killing his son more or less shocking than God doing the same thing to Jesus? As some have noted, that just sounds like divine child abuse.

What’s remarkable to me about these interpretations and religious commentaries is how virtually all of them overlook what seems to me to be the fundamental point of the story: Abraham does *not* in fact kill his son. What’s more, God is the one who prevents it.

That puts quite a different spin on the story, especially since child sacrifice was not uncommon in ancient Mesopotamian cultures, which was understood as a way to secure the favor of the gods. In that light, this story, one of the foundational stories in Israel’s history, suggests a brand new religious insight: Israel’s God is not like all the others; Israel’s God wants to bring that kind of violence to an end.

Indeed, by the time we get to the later Hebrew prophets, even the whole system of animal sacrifice is being called into question. “What are your sacrifices to me?” God asks in Isaiah. “I take no delight in the blood of bulls and goats.”

So let’s back up here for a moment and take a slightly broader view of things, especially the relationship between theology and Scripture in our lives of faith.

I think it’s terribly important to realize that our human understanding of what we mean by the word “God” evolves slowly over time. The stories we read in the Bible represent a time when such developments had reached a particular stage, which is different from the time when the events recorded in the story actually took place, which is different still from the time when some of the later stories were written down.

Who God is and what God asks of us, and who we are and what our hope is in relationship to God will look just a bit different and sometimes dramatically so depending on whether you are Abraham or Moses or David or Mary or the Apostle Paul.

There’s no need to be surprised or alarmed by that. Our understanding of how plants grow and where babies come from and why people get sick – all of these and many more evolve over time, too. Why should it be any different when dealing with the profound mystery we call “God”?

Just as we do in figuring out how the world works, so also with our encounters with God: We need to ponder and investigate and inquire together, share insights, experiment, try on new ideas and trust that the presence of God in our midst will lead us, eventually and over time, into the truth.

So we keep reading these ancient texts from Scripture even, and perhaps especially the ones that might trouble us because we mustn’t take anything for granted, and these ancient writers might still have something to teach us.

From this story in Genesis, for example, we might learn from Abraham, who did the best he could with what he knew at the time and trusted God to take care of the rest. I, for one, can still learn from that. Trust doesn’t mean knowing in advance how everything is going to turn out. In the life of faith, we trust that the God who promises is faithful, even when we can’t see over the horizon.

But we might also learn something about sacrifice from this story.

The notion of sacrifice is fraught with a whole range of assumptions and problems. As a Christian community we encounter it quite frequently. In some form or other we encounter the idea of sacrifice every time we gather around this Eucharistic table. As we do so again this morning, the story from Genesis urges us to consider what it is we're remembering at this table and what we mean by "sacrifice."

Personally, I'm not troubled by the notion of sacrifice per se. Most of the parents I know make all sorts of sacrifices for the sake of their children. Many of us could quickly recount moving stories of people who make sacrifices for the sake of compassion and justice. American history is full of such stories, from the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century to the civil rights movement in the twentieth.

We hear stories quite regularly today about humanitarian aid workers in various parts of the world who sacrifice their safety for the sake of human thriving. And let's not forget ourselves: Many of you here sacrifice your time, energy, and money for the sake of making this faith community a place of abundant life; that's no small thing.

So it's not sacrifice that troubles me. I am troubled, however, by the demand for sacrifice, by the requirement of a scapegoat, by the idea that God needs a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice.

If we can say anything at all about divine justice from reading the Bible it is surely this: God demands an end to scapegoating the innocent, indeed an end to scapegoating of any kind. "Go and learn what this means," Matthew's Jesus says, "I desire mercy not sacrifice" (9:13). That may well be one of the primary lessons our society needs to learn from Scripture today.

To put this in another way: the God in whom we place our trust would surely have wept if Isaac had been killed and whose heart surely broke as Jesus suffered and died. And it's that God who calls us to the Eucharistic table this morning.

This is the table of both memory and hope. At this table we remember the death of Jesus, the cost of bearing witness to the God of life in a world of violence. But that's not all. At this table we also remember the hope of resurrection, God's own promise that death does not have the final word.

We gather at this table together because neither the memory nor the hope is easy. We need each other when faced with painful and difficult memories; we also need each other to keep hoping for what we cannot yet see.

As we come to the table, let's remind each other that the God who calls us here is the God of promise. This morning, both Abraham and Jesus can remind us that the God of promise is faithful.

Amen.