

Text: Genesis 22: 1-14
Title: The Binding
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Roger Allen Nelson

Note: There are some texts that you kid yourself into thinking you have a handle on ~ and then there are texts like this one that take you behind the woodshed and whup ya. I am indebted to Walter Brueggemann and his commentary on Genesis for meeting me behind the woodshed.

God spoke and it felt like tympanis pounding in Abraham's chest.

Take your son...
 Boom, boom!
Your only son, whom you love...
 Boom, boom!
Isaac!
 Boom, boom!

With each word God got more specific. With each word everything slowed down. With each word Abraham felt his chest tighten. He had heard God speak this way before:

Leave your country...
 Boom, boom!
Your homeland...
 Boom, boom!
Your father's house...
 Boom, boom!

It was all Abraham could do to breathe; all he could hear was the thundering of his heart. Boom, boom, boom...

What was God asking? What did God want?
Wasn't God different than the neighbor's gods?
God wouldn't abide with, let alone demand, human sacrifice!
How could he obey God this time?
He had just sent away Ishmael; how could he bear another loss?
What kind of God would ask such a thing?
What God would require the death of a son just to prove who sat highest on his heart's throne?
He had bargained mercy for Sodom ~ but now sacrifice his son.....
What kind of capricious God is that?
What would he say to Sarah?

Dear friends, maybe it's the horror of the text that makes us want to explore the emotional life of Abraham and Isaac. We want to put ourselves in the place of the main characters and struggle with the text from there. The story makes us recoil and it draws us in. It is simultaneously unthinkable and yet inviting of imagination.

For example, in "Fear and Trembling," Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard presents four alternative readings of Abraham's struggle and uses them to discuss the nature of faith. Listen to this imaginative reading of Abraham's anguish:

Then Abraham averted his face for a moment; but when Isaac looked again, his father's countenance was changed, his glance wild, his aspect terrible, he seized Isaac and threw him to the ground and said, "Thou foolish lad, believest thou I am thy father? An idol-worshipper am I. Believest thou it is God's command? Nay, but my pleasure."

Then Isaac trembled and cried out in his fear, "God in heaven, have pity on me, God of Abraham, show mercy to me, I have no father on earth, be thou then my father!"

But Abraham said softly to himself, "Father in heaven, I thank thee. Better is it that he believes me inhuman than that he should lose his faith in thee."

Something about the story is simultaneously unthinkable and yet inviting of imagination, but... But, the actual text, while layered and dense and open to all sorts of interpretations and allusions, is remarkably spartan with the details of the internal struggle of Abraham or the exchange between Abraham and Isaac.

There is no word if Abraham argued with God.

There is no word of what they said while they traveled for three days.

There is no word of Isaac crying out "Why have you forsaken me?"

No word of Isaac pleading for this to pass from him.

No word of Abraham's anguish.

So, what if rather than looking to Abraham...

What if rather than looking for an illustration of faith in Abraham?

What if we anchor the text this way?

What if we read it about God and not about Abraham?

What if we read it as holding an internal tension in God?

For, in the words of John Calvin:

The command and the promise of God are in conflict.

The promise of God to Abraham was that he would be blessed, be a great nation, and all the peoples on earth would be blessed through him. Isaac was the first installment on that promise. But, the command of God was that Isaac be killed. (Biblical Hebrew has five

words for sacrifice; none are used here. The word here is slaughter or slay. There is no mistaking.....)

So, with no Isaac, Abraham would have trusted and followed and then found it all to be for nought. No Isaac ~ no promise. God gives with one hand and commands it taken away with the other. God gives life and commands death.

We belittle the text if we make it just a God who tests and tinkers in jest. The promise was made in sovereignty and the command was made in sovereignty. We would take God at his word.

There is here then what Martin Luther calls *a contradicition with which God contradicts himself*. The promise and the command of God collide.

In fact, John Calvin says that the real anguish here is not the horror of the death of a son, but the death of faith. In his words:

It was sad for him to be deprived of his only son, sadder still that this son should be torn away by a violent death, and by far the most grievous that he himself should be appointed as the executioner to slay him with his own hand.... But all these things, if we compare them with the spiritual conflict of conscience which he endured, will appear like the mere play, or shadows of conflicts. For the great source of grief to him was not his own bereavement, not that he was commanded to slay his only heir.... but that, in the person of this son, the whole salvation of the world seemed to be extinguished and to perish..... For God...requires the death of the boy, to whose person He himself had annexed the hope of eternal salvation. So that this latter command was, in a certain sense, the destruction of faith.

There is a scandalous contradiction ~ the promise of God and the command of God.

But...But what if is this just a test? Is God at work, even in contradiction, just monkeying with the details of life as a way to test faith, or teach a lesson, or make a point? Or is there something more essential here?

Dear friends, not to create an easy moralism out of this story of “dark command” and “high promise,” is it helpful to think of this as the tension in which we live?

We live between those two poles: God promises and commands.

Or, as Walter Brueggemann frames it: God tests and God provides.

We live in the middle of that “contradiction” and the call or the “test” or the reality is: Can we live with a faith, not that makes mustard and moves mountains, but that simply believes God’s promises even when life is hard, harsh, and horrific? Even when the shadow of a knife hangs over our head can we believe God to be faithful? Even when we are bound up in our brokenness may we find ourselves

bound to the promises of God? Can we be faithful to God's commands, even when it seems less than expedient, in the faith that God will provide?

There is something in this text that is primitive and puzzling. And I can't shake the profoundly troubling (repugnant) notion that God needs sacrifice, slaughter for sin, blood for blunder. But, the gospel is, to use the words of the writer of Hebrews:

By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your will spring will be reckoned." Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.

No matter what the test ~ God will provide.

No matter what the command ~ God will be faithful to his promise.

We live in the middle.

Earlier this week I went to see Ted Boswell in the hospital. Ted spent the substantial part of his professional life as a CRC missionary in Japan; he now teaches at Providence – Saint Mel, a black-private-Christian-school, on the city's west side. He was in the hospital for spinal cord surgery. When I saw him he was in recovery, waiting and wondering what would come next, knowing that the surgery had been marginally successful. We talked, told stories, laughed, commiserated, and prayed, but as I turned to go Ted said, "Rog, the night before surgery I read this beautiful prayer by Thomas a Kempis, from the 1400s. Six hundred years ago. Let me see if I can remember it" And, flat on his back, he said:

O Lord, you know what is best for us, let this or that be done, as you please. Give what you will, and how much you will, and when you will. Deal with me as you think good, and as best pleases you. Set me where you will, and deal with me in all things just as you will. For, I am your servant, prepared for all things; for I desire not to live unto myself, but unto you; and Oh, that I could do it worthily and perfectly! Amen.

And Ted's eyes lit up with a measure of peace. It was a deep, hard won peace, recognizing that our confidence is not in our strength, or our service. or our sacrifice, but our confidence is in God. For, come what may ~ God will provide.

You know at the end of the story Abraham names the place: *Yahweh-yireh* "The Lord provides" He doesn't name it *Abraham-shama* "Abraham obeyed." Because finally this story is not about Abraham's faith, being tested and being found faithful, but it is about God being found faithful.

For the command of God and the promise of God finally led God,
in deep anguish of soul,
to hoist the wood of sacrifice on his son's shoulders,

and climb that hard harsh mountain of provision .

God promised and God commanded and God provided.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.