

Sept. 19 – The Binding of Isaac

We take a huge jump in the biblical story today. Last week we read the first creation story and today we addressed the second one in the children's message (at Zion.) Now our lectionary jumps all the way over Adam and Eve's failure to trust God. It jumps over Cain and Abel and the first murder.

We blew right past Noah and the great flood and skipped the Tower of Babel. Chapters 3 through 11 in Genesis are pretty much one story after another about people failing to live the way God wanted them to. (We will actually address some of that next week in the children's message.)

Now, here we are, already in the story of Abraham and Sarah. In fact, this is actually the end of the story of Abraham and Sarah. Before this, God promised Abraham and Sarah that they would be the parents of a whole nation of people. That nation would be God's answer to evil – they would be the family through whom God would bless all the families of the earth. They would be a shining example of how beautiful life with God could be.

The problem of course is that Abraham and Sarah seemed unable to produce even one child, let alone a nation.

Well, you know how the story goes – God continues to promise that they will have a son. And finally they do. Isaac.

Now this. I mean, what the heck?

This is one of the most disturbing stories in all of scripture. You can always tell a tough story by the many options for interpretation. Most Bible stories have more than one interpretation, but this one might win the prize for the most.

The first really just takes the first verse of chapter 22 at face value – God tested Abraham. This interpretation focuses on the sovereignty of God – God will do what God will do and it's not for us to question. In life, our faith gets tested too.

There are times when we go through really rough patches...like maybe the last year and a half. I don't believe that God causes those things, but God no doubt knows we will be tested during the tough times in our lives. We may doubt that God really is on our side...we may even doubt there is a God. Maybe for some the faith of Abraham really is an inspiration.

But Abraham's test seems unnecessarily cruel. It's pretty hard to reconcile that image of God with a God of love who promises to bless the whole world.

The Jewish theologians have had centuries more time to wrestle with this story than Christians. A common interpretation for them is that Abraham actually failed the test – that God wanted him to speak up and work to save his son.

Muslims believe that Ishmael, Abraham's son by Sarah's servant, Hagar, was the son who went up the mountain with Abraham.

Common in almost all Christian perspectives is to note the parallels between Isaac and Jesus. We'll come back to that in a minute, because it is an important angle to the story. But we still need to confront the story in its own time first.

I think the most compelling interpretation is based in understanding the religious world of that time. Remember last week we talked about how the Genesis creation story painted an entirely different picture of God compared to the violent Babylonian gods.

Sacrifice was an important part of early religion. As human consciousness evolved, humans began to see that they were at the mercy of forces they couldn't control. They called those forces gods and they offered sacrifices to make those gods happy. They thought that would ensure their well-being.

The problem was that the ante just kept getting upped. Years of famine or flood or other disaster convinced people they hadn't done enough to please their gods. So the sacrifice just kept getting more sacrificial. At some point, the sacrifice of a child became the ultimate.

As Rob Bell, Christian author put it, the answer to "What kind of god would ask a man to sacrifice his son?" is "Not this one." In that way of understanding the story, God is making clear in a very dramatic way that child sacrifice is not how you please God. That this God is about life and blessing, not death.

Underneath all of the ways of interpretation is the question, Can God be trusted? Can God be trusted to fulfill the promise made to Abraham and Sarah? Can God be trusted to be on the side of life and not on the side of death? Can God be trusted to be for us, even when we go through times of intense testing?

Abraham apparently decided God could be trusted. Let's go back through the story and look at a couple things a little closer.

The first is in verse 5. ⁵Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you."

We will come back. Abraham fully trusted that Isaac would be coming back down that mountain with him, despite evidence to the contrary. God had kept the promise to Abraham and Sarah that they would have a son.

Abraham had no way of knowing how this current challenge would play out. He knew that other people believed their gods demanded the sacrifice of children.

He believed his God was different. But that's not the same as knowing for sure.

The second thing to pay attention to is verse 8 – Abraham tells puzzled Isaac, God will provide the lamb. Again, Abraham trusts that somehow, God's got this in hand.

In a situation that seemed to be certain death...not only to Isaac, but to God's whole plan...Abraham trusted that God would somehow bring life instead. And God did. God did provide an animal for the sacrifice. God did keep the promise alive. God proved faithful, even if it was a pretty terrible story. It's a story that still leaves a lot of questions. Any interpretation that ties this story up too neatly is probably incomplete.

But this does bring us to the place where we can connect with another Jewish son a couple thousand years later...Jesus. We can also make some connections to our own lives.

For three days, Abraham and Isaac journeyed to the Mountain of Moriah. For three days, Isaac seemed as good as dead. But then, on the third day on the top of the mountain, he wasn't. He and Abraham did come back down the mountain, Isaac no doubt shaken, but alive.

God sent the son Jesus to bring healing and renewal to the world.

His proclamation of the reign of God and a reign of love over against human love of power and violence got him killed. For three days, Jesus wasn't just as good as dead...he was dead.

And then on the third day he wasn't.

God can be trusted to be on the side of life. Not only that, God can bring the dead to life.

So, we will be tested. Again, I don't think God makes bad things happen to test us. Why bad things happen is a whole other sermon, but it's clear that God doesn't prevent us from the suffering that comes from even severe testing.

Instead, God can be trusted to walk with us, and even when things are so bad, we think, I might as well be dead, God is there waiting to bring us back to life.

And of course, there's no bigger test than literal death. But even then, God can be trusted to be on the side of life. Like God provided the ram for Abraham, God has provided a way to eternal life for us.

Trusting in eternal life doesn't take away the agony and anxiety of that trudge up the mountain. But we can trust that whatever painful mountain we are climbing, whatever fears we are facing, whatever sorrow we are living, even when we are facing death, God will be there, ready to bring life out of death.