

A Sermon for the Third Sunday after Pentecost 2014 Proper 8A
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As I hope you've come to know by now, I take scripture very seriously. All of it.

The parts that make sense to me and the parts that don't. The parts that give me joy and the parts that make me angry. The parts I like and the parts I don't like.

And there are lots of parts in scripture that are just plain disturbing, Places where God seems destructive rather than creative or nurturing. Places where Jesus asks us to do things that are hard if not impossible to even consider.

And there are certainly many places in scripture where death is portrayed as part of God's purpose or plan – wholesale destruction, even, like Noah's flood or the drowning of Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea, or the destruction of the cities of the plain.

But there is, in my thinking, no harder to take story in all of scripture than the story of Abraham and Isaac, that we often call the sacrifice of Isaac (although that doesn't actually happen), but which Jewish tradition calls the "*akedah*" or binding of Isaac. I have been wrestling all week with what to say to you about this terrible, terrible story, as scholars have been wrestling with it for thousands of years, and I can tell you that none of us have had much success in finding a way to understand

this story that doesn't make both God and Abraham look bad, like conspirators in child abuse.

But I thought I would share with you a little bit of my wrestling.

In the first place, you should know that this is a particular kind of story – what scholars of scripture and mythology call an “etiology,” which is to say that it is a story that attempts to explain why some aspect of the world or life is the way it is. You know many of these kinds of stories, I'm sure. They often end with a phrase like “and that is why, even to this day...” Rudyard Kipling's “How the Elephant Got His Trunk” is one, the story of Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden is another.

The story of Isaac and Abraham is an etiological story that is intended to explain that God is opposed to human sacrifice.

And if it were just that, we could be content knowing that our ancestors gave up the barbaric practice millennia ago, and we have neither the need nor the desire to take it up again.

But unfortunately, it's not just a moral fable. Abraham and Isaac are human beings, father and son, whose stories are rich enough in detail that we have to see them as humans, not just symbols, and think about this story in human terms.

Here's Isaac, the son Abraham and Sarah had given up hope of ever having – so much so that they both laughed at the very idea when God let them know their old age would be blessed with a child. And from this Isaac gets his very name, for Isaac means “Laughter” or “He who laughs.”

We heard last week how God promised to make a nation out of Isaac's descendants, numberless as the stars, and to make a nation out of Ishmael, Abraham's son by his wife's servant Hagar as well.

And now, monstrously, God, tests Abraham by telling him to take this miracle child up on the mountain and make an offering of his life and his body to God. I won't give you the gruesome details, but the Hebrew words about how this is to be done are specific and horrific. And just as monstrously, Abraham, the same Abraham who argued with God about the destruction of the cities of the plain, who laughed at God's plans for his descendants, just goes along with it.

He walks Isaac up the mountain – even makes Isaac carry the firewood for the burnt offering – telling Isaac that God will provide the sacrifice – knowing himself to be a liar as he says it, although it turns out to be the one true thing in the story.

Søren Kierkegaard, the great Danish theologian, wrote an entire book pondering this story. It is called *Fear and Trembling*, and in it he puts himself in Abraham's

shoes and imagines four different scenarios, from Abraham taking the blame for God's unholy command to Abraham losing his nerve and inventing the story of the ram to explain why he has not done God's bidding. Kierkegaard, however, fails to consider the most terrible point of view – Isaac's as his father ties him up and sharpens his knife.

And Scripture, in fact, tells us very little about Isaac. It doesn't even say that he came down the mountain with his father. One Rabbinic traditional interpretation holds that Isaac went down the other side of the mountain and never spoke to his father again. In fact, in scripture, we never read of Isaac speaking again at all, until, on his deathbed, his sons play out a deceitful drama over their inheritance.

The traditional interpretation of this story is that God was testing Abraham's faithfulness, and Abraham's willingness to do this terrible thing showed the kind of trust in God that God was looking for in a chosen people. Christian interpretation also sees this as an allegorical presaging of God's sacrifice of God's own son, which, unlike Isaac's, was not interrupted.

But the full witness of scripture tells us that the obedience God is really looking for from humankind is obedience to commandments not to do terrible things to one another, not blind faith that leads to awful things.

There is, however, another possible interpretation.

What if God was testing Abraham and Abraham actually failed the test? What if he, and we, are supposed to say no to harming those we are supposed to protect no matter who is telling us to do so? What if, just as Abraham did on another occasion we are supposed to argue with God for the sake of every human being on earth, taking the side of anyone who is in danger, is vulnerable, is needy?

If that is the case, the test is still pretty over the top, pretty cruel and terrible, but at least the answer, then, offers us something to inform our lives. And it sounds more like the mandates we have from God through Jesus. Especially when you look at how God responds to Abraham's failure. For Abraham fails the test, but God redeems him anyway. God saves Isaac from Abraham's failure and goes on to make a great nation from Isaac's descendants just as God had promised, even though Abraham fails the test.

This then is consistent with the rest of our walk with God, from Isaac's descendants all the way down to us. For they, and we, keep on failing. The Israelites were repeatedly, embarrassingly disobedient to God's commands. As we continue to read the story of Abraham's descendants through the summer, you will hear it over and over again. The Israelites lost their faith, worshipped idols, begged

God for a king when God told them no, raised up kings who continually, to use the scriptural phrase, did what was wrong in God's eyes. And yet God did not abandon them. Over and over, failure after failure, we can almost hear the exasperation in God's voice as God's people continue to test God. But God doesn't fail the test. God sticks with them despite their failures; loves them no matter how terribly they act.

And so it is for us. Our lives are full of tests – both significant and minor occasions when we have the choice to do what God calls us to do – to love God and our neighbor, to feed the hungry and heal the sick and shelter the poor, to spread the good news of God's love to the ends of the earth – and oftentimes we fail. We withhold our love, our compassion, when God would have us spend them.

And somehow, whenever we fail these tests, large or small, God redeems us. God continues to love us. God continues to give us second (and third and fourth and more) chances to try again; to be generous and loving and kind, to take a stand against cruelty and enmity and death, and to use our own redemption to help God redeem the whole world.

Amen.