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“Difficult Stories”

Genesis 22:1-14

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After these things, God tested Abraham.

God said to him, "Abraham!"

And he said, "Here I am."

God said, "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 will show you."

So, Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away.

Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we'll worship, and then we'll come back to you."

Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So, the two of them walked on together.

Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!"

And he said, "Here I am, my son."

He said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"

Abraham said, "God will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son."

So, the two of them walked on together. When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.

But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and

said, "Abraham, Abraham!"

And he said, "Here I am."

He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now, I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son from me."

And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So, Abraham called that place "The Lord will provide;" as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided."

Genesis 22:1-14

A minister is leading a Bible study at a shelter that provides emergency housing for teenagers. The minister has no knowledge of what is helpful for teenagers in emergency housing. He has made the peculiar choice of this story of Abraham and Isaac. The young people are confused as to why out of all the stories in the Bible they are talking about a threatening father and his terrified child. The teenagers already know way too much about frightening fathers.

Finally, a thirteen-year-old says, "Don't you think Child Protective Services should have Abraham arrested?"

The minister thinks about it for a minute before he admits, "You're right. Abraham should be telling his story to a judge."

This is a hard story. This should not be anyone's favorite Bible story. If they let you and me edit the Bible, we would get rid of it.

This is the kind of story that gives the Bible a bad name, that gives God a bad name. If you put this story 22 chapters into the Bible, who is going to want to read the rest? If the story is true—particularly the part where God tells Abraham to kill his son—who would want to believe in a God like this?

When we looked for a graphic for the front of the order of worship, we found lots of pictures of Abraham and Isaac, but most do not look like much like the horrifying event described in Genesis. A few have a halo around Abraham's head and an inexplicable smile on Isaac's face. Sometimes there is an angel floating above them. Only a few painters are honest enough to picture Abraham's face weary and broken, Isaac, dazed and confused, and the ominous knife. The truthful pictures are disturbing. Parents read this passage with wide eyes—unable to imagine sacrificing a child. We ended up using a picture of a sad woman sitting on a park bench, because it will not cause nightmares.

Recognizing that Isaac is even more than just an only child makes it even harder. The promises of God are riding on Isaac. Do you remember that part of the story? God tells Sarah and Abraham that their offspring will be as many as the grains of sand on the beach. Years pass and Abraham thinks more and more about his descendants like the stars of the sky, about how many years he and Sarah have been trying unsuccessfully to have children, and about how many specialists have told them they will never have a child.

When their son finally shows up, they name him Isaac, which means laughter, because the very idea of it is

funny—getting the senior discount on a playpen. They laugh because instead of seeing only a gynecological fluke, they see the grace of God.

Isaac embodies the promises of God. So, what happens? God says, “Kill him.”

The quick and easy way to deal with the difficulty in this story is to say that the first voice Abraham hears is not God’s. We would like to think that the voice at the beginning of the story is the voice of pagan tradition, the ancient practice of sacrificing the firstborn. But as satisfying as this explanation might be, there is no real justification in Genesis for ascribing the demand and the provision to two different voices.

The theological geniuses who put together the book of Genesis knew how problematic this story is, but they kept it. They must have had a reason. The first sentence of the story says that God is going to test Abraham.

God says, “Take your only child and kill him!”

God makes a demand. Maybe that is where we get stuck. We do not much want to believe in a God who demands that we do certain things and do not do other things. God speaks a harsh word to Abraham. And of all things, Abraham sets out to obey. Flat-eyed, grim, Abraham leads his son up the hill, muttering, “God will provide.”

Religion is not this serious to most of us. We are careful people. We calculate our charities, make small promises, and avoid anything in excess.

In Abraham we see radical, blind trust. God commanded and Abraham was committed to doing what God said, even if it meant slaughtering his only hope. The question at the heart of the story is, “Will Abraham trust the giver or only hold tightly to the gift?”

Abraham went up the hill to kill Isaac. But then, just as we hear the clatter of the knife on stone, just as Abraham's eyes fill with sweat and tears, he sees a lamb trapped in the brush.

He cries with relief, "God will provide." At the beginning, God is the one who tests. At the end, God is the one who provides.

Ellen Davis writes, "The point of this story is not to make people want to believe in Abraham's God. This harrowing story exists to help people who already believe make sense of their most difficult experiences, when God seems to take back what they received from God's hand. The point is not to draw people in, but rather to help people who are already in, stay in, stay in relationship with God, even when their world turns upside down. This story appears front and center in Genesis, where no reader of the Bible can miss it, because the hard truth is that the world turns upside down for the faithful" (Radical Trust).

A devout Christian, just a few hours after her first child has died in birth, strangled in her umbilical cord, cries, "I could say, Why me? But why not me? I knew this happens to people, and it never made me doubt God before. So why should I doubt God now? But still, I don't understand."

This is a story for when life is hard to understand. Abraham is overwhelmed by the horror of what he thought he was going to do, but he follows God's command. Abraham trusts God, even when what God asks of him runs counter to what God promised.

The great 20th-century Jewish theologian, Eliezer Berkovits, is one of the leading thinkers in Jewish theology after the Holocaust. In his book, *With God in Hell*, Berkovits

asks: “Why did so many Jews keep their faith in the Nazi deathcamps? Why did they gather to say prayers and keep Sabbath, even as the Nazis tortured and killed them? Why did they keep blessing God as the Holy One of Israel, instead of cursing God who seemed to have abandoned the Jews?”

As he puzzles over this question, Berkovits turns to this story of Abraham, and what he sees as the bottomless trust that Abraham feels for God. Berkovits imagines Abraham during those three days of hell, as he follows God to Moriah, the place of this unspeakable sacrifice, saying: God, “I don’t understand you in this situation. Your behavior violates our covenant; still, I trust you because it is you, because it is you and me, because it is us. What you’re asking of me is terrible. But I’ve known you, my God. You’ve loved me and I love you. My God, you are breaking your word to me.... Yet, I trust you; I trust you.” (Eliezer Berkovits, *With God in Hell: Judaism in the Ghettos and Deathcamps*, New York and London: Sanhedrin, 1979, 124).

Abraham is like the Jews who risked their lives to observe Sabbath in the deathcamps. Abraham will not choose survival—even his child’s survival—over life with God. For better, for worse, it is simply too late for him to live apart from God. Total, radical trust is the only thing that makes any sense of this painful story. This story makes it clear that it is hard to live with faith in God, but it also, finally, points to God’s grace.

We tend to want to choose the comfortable God who provides, and ignore the difficult God who demands, but we do not get to choose. Our commitment to God is seen in the decisions we make every day. If we do not recognize

that God makes demands, then we have set camp too far from the front lines, too far from sacrifice, humility, and unselfishness.

We understand it is easier not to think about what God wants. Believing in a comfortable God is simpler, because we like to judge people however we please. We do not want to be concerned about others' problems. We do not want to think their poverty is our concern. We do not want to worry about the planet heating up or the coral reefs dying. We do not want to worry about welcoming refugees the way Jesus insisted. We do not want to think about death, suffering, and violence. We do not want to be responsible for anyone else's well-being or healthcare or children or job.

Trusting God is hard. Loving our neighbor is hard. Kindness is hard. But we can trust God on hard days, knowing that hardships make us focus.

People who lived through the Great Depression often told stories about what those awful years were like. One woman described how her family lost everything, practically overnight. They had been quite well-to-do, and then one day, they did not have a cent to their name.

This woman would tell her great-grandchildren, "I used to think I couldn't get along without my things, and then I learned that I could."

Some family members did not recover from the shock, but she did. Her difficult story made her stronger. Telling the story to her grandchildren and great-grandchildren passed along some of that strength.

The story of Abraham and Isaac is hard to hear, but it is in the Bible because we need hard stories. We need hard stories because we forget. We need the 9/11 Memorial and Museum, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Alabama, and the US Holocaust Museum in Washington, to remember. To reflect at the deepest levels. To insist that the truth is told. To honor. To pray. When we visit these places, we are changed. We are not bystanders anymore, if we ever were, and we can never be that again.

This story in Genesis is a similar kind of place. It is a horrible story, but it calls us to trust that is bigger than the horror.

A minister papered a wall of her office with custom-made wallpaper repeating the same words line after line. She sits at her desk and reads: "Trust God, let go. Trust God, let go."

While studying Genesis 22, Miroslav Volk imagined having a conversation with his son:

"Son, suppose that God asked me, 'Who is more important to you, Nathanael or I? What do you think I should say?'"

His son said, "You should say 'God'!"

"Why?"

"You told me that my name, Nathanael, means 'God has given,' right?"

"Right."

"Well, if it were not for the giver, then there would be no gift."

"Smart boy! To receive you as a gift from God rightly, I must love God more than you. In a sense, that's what Abraham did. Are you jealous?"

“No. If it were not for God, you would not have me and I would not have you; we would not be playing soccer and skiing together, and you would not be teaching me to drive even though I am only twelve.”

A relationship with the God of Abraham and Jesus is an amazing gift, but it is not for the risk averse. If you and I trust God, we will do hard things. Caring for people is hard: waking up every morning and having to have empathy for someone who is not us, let alone someone who does not look like us, think like us, vote like us, talk like us, and worship like us. Living the Gospel Jesus stuff is hard: loving the least, being a servant, turning the other cheek, living humbly, tending to the sick and the poor, and praying for our enemies.

If we trust God, we will give up some of our comforts to care for others' needs. Trusting God is more than taking the easiest path. Trust leads us through valleys of darkness and into the shadow of death, but all the while, trust leads to life.

Trust knows the ways of sadness, but also of joy. By trust, we are carried into God's life; in trust we find one another; through trust we come home even to ourselves (Melinda Bresee Hinnens, “Close Call,” *Christian Century*, June 5-12, 2002, 21).

Trust in God is hard work, amazing possibilities, and deep joy.

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