

Grace in the Binding of Isaac

A Sermon Preached by the Rev Margot D Critchfield

St Stephen's Episcopal Church—Cohasset, MA

June 29, 2008

Proper 8A: Genesis 22:1 -14

Today's Old Testament lesson is a disturbing challenge to our domesticated ideas about the Divine Deity: It's the dreaded story of God testing Abraham by demanding the sacrifice of his beloved son Isaac. The "Binding of Isaac," or the *Akedah* as it's known in Hebrew literature, is the kind of story that too many of us tragically dismiss as a story about "that Old Testament God"---as if there's more than one God in the Biblical witness and this one's been superceded by a new and improved version in the New Testament.

But no. This is the same loving God who took on flesh and bones to become one of us in Jesus. So what's going on here?

It's certainly no wonder that we want to dismiss this story or that a lot of clergy avoid preaching on it: It is so fundamentally offensive to our modern sensibilities and our experience of a loving God. Here we encounter God *testing* Abraham—telling him to take Isaac, his long-awaited source of progeny, and to bind the boy and burn him like some sort of sacrificial animal.

Adding insult to injury, when Abraham proves his obedience to the Divine Will, God stops him with an explanation that begins, "*Now* I know that you fear God..."

Excuse me? If I were Abraham, right about now I'd want to say something to God like, "What, are you kidding? You put my son and me through this so you know whether I fear you?" I mean really...What kind of God needs to know that he's *feared* for heaven's sake? How could a God who is loving and good test his people by playing a sick game like this with them? Why would an omniscient God need to test anyone anyway? Wouldn't he know the outcome in advance? And how could any God who professes justice, mercy, and righteousness ask a man to murder his own son to prove his fidelity? Is this the kind of God we can worship, trust, or depend on?

These are the kinds of questions we can't help but ask ourselves when confronted with this horrifying text. But we need to understand—and this is the hard part--that as strange as it may seem to us, these questions would never even have occurred to this story's original hearers.

For the ancient Hebrew people among whom this story was told, God's character was not up for discussion—*theirs* was. In the face of the kind of darkness and despair that could strain anyone's faith, they would have heard this story as a powerful reminder of what they already knew but were tempted to forget when confronted with a seemingly impossible situation: that as a people, represented in the figure of Abraham, they had somehow managed to be obedient

and faithful to God through impossibly difficult times before. They would have been inspired to think that if they could do it then, they could do it again, now, in their current context. By the story's end, they probably would've wondered how they had ever doubted God, because of course God would be merciful—That's God's nature, isn't it? How could they forget?

But what about us? What can we possibly learn from a story with which it is so difficult for us to identify, about a people with whom we have so little in common?

There's a wonderful quote from a book called *The Nun's Story* that says: "Never forget that God tests his real friends more severely than the lukewarm ones." It's a quote Abraham would no doubt have appreciated. My Old Testament professor in seminary, Dr. Ellen Davis, was unambiguous about God's motive for testing Abraham. Simply put, Dr. Davis maintained that God had to.

The divine "Lover of Souls" as she often referred to God, wanted nothing more than to bless humankind by being in covenant relationship with us. But we kept burning God by betraying his trust: Adam and Eve were willfully disobedient, Cain was murderous, and at one point we were so wicked that God decided to completely start over. Things were looking good there for a while with Noah, but then there was that whole ugly Tower of Babel incident, and God was heart-broken by our faithlessness yet again.

By the time Abraham enters the picture, by Dr. Davis's reckoning God has absolutely no reason whatsoever to trust humankind. Nonetheless, God tries again. God just won't give up on His creation, no matter what.

He chooses Abram as the vehicle for his blessing, and then the *next* ten chapters of Genesis are the story of Abraham's 25-year, somewhat less than stellar career as God's chosen one. Twenty-five years in which Abraham vacillates between faithfulness and fearfulness, alternately trusting and betraying God's repeated promises of blessing, offspring, and land.

Fearing a famine, Abraham leaves the land to which God has called him.

Fearing for his own life, Abraham makes his wife lie and say she's his sister. Fearing no heirs, he gets a concubine pregnant. Now does Abraham sound like a man of faith, or fear, to you? Does he sound like a man who trusts *above all else* that God will provide?

Looking at it from Dr. Davis's perspective, it's hard to blame God for testing Abraham. After all, he's entrusting the future of his entire relationship with humankind to this one man. Surely it's not so unreasonable that God wants to know for certain if Abraham really loves Him with all of his heart, and all of his mind, and all of his soul.

But I wonder if maybe Abraham needs to be know this himself, even more than God does. We all know that times of crisis—or testing—can be profoundly challenging opportunities for spiritual growth. I remember reading a sermon by Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams in which he said that when one is "tested" in the Bible, the primary purpose for such testing is always to find out

who we really are, what we're really made of. And it's in times of crisis and breakdown, he notes, that we face such testing.

Well, the more time I spend with this story, the more convinced I become that the real purpose of this test was not for God to see if Abraham feared him enough, or whether he was trustworthy. I think this test was really about Abraham finding out who *he* was, and what his faith was really made of.

Abraham needed to know he would be faithful. Abraham needed to know that even if God didn't spare Isaac, that even if God demanded the absolutely impossible of him, he would still trust God with his life and God would, indeed, provide somehow. And once Abraham realized that *nothing* could separate him from the love of God, once he knew he would be faithful and obedient even in impossibly difficult times, his faith was solidified like never before.

You see, it was Abraham, not God, who really needed to know he trusted the Lord wholeheartedly.

I have a close friend who lost her teenage son in a tragic accident. Five years later—with two other children in tow—she almost lost her husband, too. I remember my friend telling me that while she didn't think for one minute that God was "testing" her with these crises, they had indeed profoundly tested her faith.

After the death of her son, she had totally turned away from God in anger and grief. When she finally, by necessity, turned around again because she just couldn't live with no God, she found God waiting faithfully with open arms.

My friend remembered this when her husband almost died five years later. And this time, she naturally turned *toward* God, instead away from him. See, my friend had learned the hard way that even if the worst she could imagine happened, it wasn't as bad as living without the God she'd turned away from. She learned the hard way that the loss of her faith was worse than any other loss she could experience. She learned the hard way that she could be faithful even through the worst crisis of her life, and that God would, indeed, provide.

Like Abraham, my friend found out what her faith was made of. She realized that nothing could separate her from the love of God—not even her worst nightmare. In Biblical language, this is the "fear" of God.

Fear of God, in the Biblical sense, is a beautiful thing, a holy thing—not the kind frightening, threatening fear we usually think of. The Hebrew word is closer to what we would think of as "reverent awe"...this profound awareness of God's majesty, mercy, and infinite love. It's that feeling of the holy you might get when you're overwhelmed by the vastness of a night sky, by the smallness of an infant's fingers, or when in one of your most vulnerable moments you feel the steadfast and tender love God has for you. It's being struck silent out of sheer awe at the realization that God's God, and you're not—and that you can't live without God, no matter what.

The Biblical book of Proverbs calls the fear of the Lord the beginning of all wisdom. By Church tradition it's one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. Yet it's a gift many of us today would probably mark "return to sender." So many of us seem to want a watered down God, a God who comes with all the requisite love, but void of the mystery and majesty and power. In short, a pretty tame, domesticated God.

Theologian Will Willimon of Duke University has speculated about how Abraham might respond to this sort of contemporary religion. He says that Abraham---no stranger to the ways of God—"would know that a mad, disordered, barbaric age" such as ours, "needs more than a faith with no other claim, than that its God can be served without cost." Willimon's words point us to the hard truth that there *is* a cost to serving our God. A cost, and a reward.

We live in times of crisis that test us constantly—as individuals, as a church, as a nation. It's just part of life in this broken world. Every day our morning newspapers are packed with the potential to derail us as people of faith. So it is a gift to remember our father Abraham today, and the sacrifice he was asked to make. It is a gift to remember that we too have been faithful through impossibly difficult times before, and will no doubt be called upon to do it again.

But above all else, it is a gift to remember *always* that our God—the God of Abraham and the God of Jesus—is a God far more loving, far more steadfast, and far more faithful than we could ever hope to be! Amen.