

God's Great Reversal

Genesis 22:1-19 July 2, 2017 Roger Barkley

There is a Yiddish folk tale that asks why God didn't send an angel to Abraham to tell him to sacrifice Isaac.

The answer is because God knew that no angel would take on such a task.

Be honest now:

Who else heard this passage and wondered what kind of God would ask a parent to offer their child as a burnt offering?

You may even be wondering why this story is in the Bible.

But, no problem, some argue, because all those arcane rules and brutal stories of the Old Testament are replaced by the love and forgiveness of New Testament ... right?

But here's the deal: The Old Testament is the Bible Jesus knew.

The God we meet in the Old Testament is the same God we meet through Jesus.

That means that the God who called Abraham to walk his only son Isaac up Mount Moriah while carrying the wood for his own sacrifice is the same God Whose Spirit spoke the Beatitudes, and Whose Spirit inspired Paul to write, *faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love.*

But before we can get that, we have to know something about the cultural, religious and historical context in which God was working.

Because God meets us where we are at – in our culture, our circumstance, our crisis.

Maybe you've noticed that in your own journey: in your confusion, your need, your mess – that's where God appears, and may be that's where you are guided to a new, healthier way.

So, as best we can, we must step into Abraham's world if we are to discover this outrageously gracious God turning the religious expectations of those times on their head.

So, first, a little context.

Over the past couple of weeks, we've talked about the religion that Abram and his clan would have inherited from living in ancient Mesopotamia.

Then, we talked about how the voice of an unknown God called him with the promise that he would become the father of a great nation that would bless all the people of the earth.

All he had to do was leave everything that felt safe and familiar and follow this unknown God into the unknown land of Canaan.

Of course, this was preposterous because not only did Abram not know this God, but his wife Saria was barren.

In other words, Abram's family line was at a dead end – which was the ultimate shame and tragedy of his time.

So, there would be no children to honor their father, and certainly no children to multiply into a great nation.

But it often is in our barrenness, our hopelessness, or our defeat that God does His best work.

In Abram's world, there were thought to be many local deities: a god of this or that mountain, or this or that valley – so Abram may have assumed that a regional god was calling him.

Yet there was something in this call that prompted Abram to gamble everything on this wild promise, so he uprooted his family and journeyed to the strange hilly land of Canaan that bordered the Mediterranean Sea along one side, and the Jordan River Valley on the other.

Stepping back even further, from time immemorial, humans had felt powerless over the forces of nature.

They came to envision an array of gods and goddesses who controlled rain, harvests, yields of fish and prey, and human fertility.

Actually, conceiving of these divine beings was a giant step forward in the evolution of human consciousness.

Think about it:

Animals just take things as they come, but early humans were awakening to spiritual powers beyond themselves.

So, if sun, moon, rain, crops and fertility are controlled by various deities, then the next logical step is to find ways get on their good side.

It may be completely one-sided, but it was the beginning of a relationship with the divine.

It turns out not to be so easy because experience shows that sometimes the gods become angry or neglectful ... why else would we have droughts, floods, or women who fail to conceive?

So, people began to send offerings of valuable things up to the gods to win their blessing and appease their anger.

The problem was that they never knew exactly what or how much to sacrifice.

Their fear was that if they sacrificed too little that rain god might be offended, so the Spring rains may not materialize and that would leave you without food.

But what if you have a bumper crop?

Shouldn't you sacrifice some of the crop to show your gratitude?

Doesn't it make sense that the gods would be offended if you failed to recognize their blessing?

So, people built altars and put them on hilltops to get as close as possible to the gods.

Then they'd offer a goat, a cow, maybe a few birds.

But how much is enough to please or placate the gods?

Maybe you can see that at their core, all early religions were plagued with anxiety, anxiety about whether their sacrifices were enough to stay on the good side of the gods.

That means that there was always pressure to bring bigger sacrifices, more frequent sacrifices and more valuable sacrifices.

By the way: can you see how human sacrifice came to be?

It was a logical step.

If you really need to get the attention of the gods, why not go all the way and sacrifice a virgin girl or your first-born son?

That was the world Abram and his clan knew.

So, we shouldn't be surprised that, in today's passage, when God said to drop everything and go sacrifice his son, Abraham wasn't confused.

Notice that he didn't say, "What are you talking about?"

He didn't ask, "How would I go about doing such a thing?"

No, he knew exactly what was expected of him ... that's what gods do.

Okay, God meets us where we are at ... but why didn't God just spell it out and announce that people had it all wrong?

Why not skip the whole sacrifice thing?

Why persist with the notions of all the gods and goddesses of this and that?

Why not just go directly to monotheism and announce progressive ethics?

That's because faith – both as individuals and as a society – is a journey through which truth unfolds through many encounters with God in many situations of life.

Liam Hedge-Ray is about to enter kindergarten.

So why not just skip all that kid stuff and send him right into high school ... or shoot, right to Cal Tech?

Because first he must learn his letters, and how to play well with others at recess, and how to study for his SATs.

Likewise, Abraham had a great deal to learn about God ... but the amazing thing is that over his lifetime his relationship with God was so profound that it changed the history of religion.

But not instantly ... life doesn't work that way.

All these stories in the Bible are templates for our inner journey.

That's why they resonate with us, which is why they stick with us, why they rattle around in our brains, and why they've been told and retold for centuries.

These stories work on us, and we work them out in our lives, and over time our individuals lives work them out as society.

Not only that – and this is really important – God had a lot to learn about Abraham.

Remember – Abraham was risking everything based on God's promise.

But God was risking everything on Abraham, the one God chose to build a family and then a nation that will bless the world.

The narrative opens with Genesis 22:1.

In the NRSV it says, *After these things God tested Abraham.*

After all what things?

Well, it was a mixed bag of experiences with Abraham, which is why God needed to be sure.

On the one hand, we've seen how Abraham did some things with great faith.

He did answer the call to go to Canaan, he welcomed and provided for strangers – the highest virtue of the Ancient Near East – and he developed a trust in God so deep that he risked engaging God in debate, as he did with the fate of his nephew, Lot, in Sodom.

But, like all of us, he both trusted God and he fell short.

For example, twice when he feared that some neighboring kings would kill him in order to take his wife Sarai into their concubines, he had her pose as his sister so she could be taken away without risking Abraham's life.

I officiated Charles and Elysse Deary's wedding yesterday afternoon, and I'm pretty sure that move was ruled-out by their vows.

In one of those incidents, Abraham essentially said that he couldn't trust that God would be there for him, so he chose to hand-over Sarai and to lie to save his own skin.

And then, of course, is how he and Sarah got frustrated by the long wait for God to allow them to conceive, so they took matters into their own hands and had Abraham get-it-on with Sarah's slave girl, Hagar.

Hagar conceived a son, Ishmael, but this was not God's plan, so God reprimanded Abraham's poor judgment and lack of faith and reminded him about God's perfect timing.

And it didn't work out so well for poor Ishmael, either.

As he and Hagar were being driven away by a jealous Sarah, Abram failed to so much as stand-up for his own son.

Hagar and her infant son had to strike out on their own, and Ishmael is considered the father of Arab tribes and a forefather of Mohammed, the founder of Islam.

So, today's passage was a real test that God was putting Abraham through.

God was not sure how Abraham would respond, and He needed to know.

So, God tells Abraham to take the most precious thing in his life – his only remaining son, whom we are told Abraham loves, and upon whom all the decades of promises that Abraham will father a great nation depend upon – to take him to a hill top, build an altar and sacrifice him.

Genesis 22:3 Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey.

Abraham doesn't hesitate, he gets on it right away because this is what people expected of gods at the time.

They demanded we sacrifice what we value to appease their pettiness, and to keep their favor.

So off they go, hardly talking to each other for three days.

I can't help but wonder what was going on in their minds as they walked along in silence.

In the Hebrew and Islamic traditions, Isaac is imagined as a boy – maybe twelve or thirteen-years-old.

Scripture doesn't tell us his age, but in that scenario the moral focus of the story is on Abraham and his faith – his willingness to give it all back to God.

In some Christian traditions, the scenario imagines Isaac as a young man.

His father may be old and dotty at this point, so the moral focus of the story is on Isaac's willingness to sacrifice himself because it is God's will.

In this scenario, Isaac – carrying the wood of his own sacrifice – foreshadows Jesus' march to the cross.

Anyway, they finally arrive at the base of Moriah.

Genesis 22:5 *He (Abraham) said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you."*

Does a little alarm going off in the back of your head when you hear that line?

He's going to sacrifice his son, but *they* will be right back?

So, they start up the hill and Isaac must feel like "dead man walking" – so he asks his dad (and notice the intimate language here):

Genesis 22:7-8 *Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?"*

"Yes, my son?" Abraham replied.

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

Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together.

That's a non-answer.

Is Abraham being evasive, sly, or is he in on the joke (or whatever you'd call it).

Whatever the case, Abraham binds his son on top of the fire wood and is about to slit his throat when God stops him and says,

Genesis 22:12 (Amp) *"... for now I know that you fear God [with reverence and profound respect], since you have not withheld from Me your son, your only son [of promise]."*

Then Abraham looks up and a ram has appeared, which he sacrifices in the place of his son.

Genesis 22:14 *So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided."*

By the way, Mount Moriah is the site where centuries later Solomon would build the Jerusalem Temple, so the sacrifice of this ram is the beginning of the Temple system that will follow.

So, this is the end of the story, right?

No, because now God has been assured of Abraham's devotion, reassured that this is the man upon whom God will stake the future, so God then says,

Genesis 22:16-18 "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."

So, rather than being the end of Isaac, it is the beginning of a new era.

And now we have the answer to question I raised at the beginning of this message: What kind of god would demand that you sacrifice your own son?

And the answer is *not this God*.

That's important, because we know that for many years the Hebrew people were surrounded by people who on occasion practiced child sacrifice.

Why else would prophets rail against this practice?

As late as 550-years before Christ, Ezekiel said,

Ezekiel 20:31 When you offer your gifts—the sacrifice of your children in the fire—you continue to defile yourselves with all your idols to this day.

But why all the drama of this story?

Because stories grab us ... they cause us to think and reflect in a way that a list or rules could never do.

And in this example, its original hearers would think they knew story.

This is what the gods do – they demand everything.

Other gods may demand your first born; Abraham is just doing what others have done so many times before.

It's familiar ... but then it's not.

Suddenly it takes an unpredictable turn and everything is different.

This God doesn't take; He provides.

That was a mindblower.

That's why this story is so compelling.

That's why this story got told and retold through centuries of time, within many cultures, and eventually included in our Bible.

And what was demanded of Abraham?

Not sacrifices, but faith ... faith in God's ultimate goodness.

Faith that God will provide.

Maybe you've got some story running around your own mind that you can earn God's love by sacrificing more.

You work harder and harder to be successful ... sacrificing your health and your relationships.

You buy more to look successful, sacrificing your wellbeing for the biggest, the latest this or that.

You sacrifice integrity to win love of the people around you, not speaking up, allowing your personal boundaries to be trampled.

But God's love is freely given.

Yes, you have to work hard in life – but God invites you to do so with an inner peace, a certain knowing that all your fretting and working isn't needed for God's love and peace and joy to live and flourish within you.

Those gods of work and materialism and people-pleasing – they will keep demanding more and more and eventually give you less and less and less.

But God's love is freely given, and His love will nurture and sustain you on your entire journey through life.