

July 2, 2023
“Here I Am”
Genesis 22:1-14 / Matthew 10:40-42
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On the heels of last week's unsettling story from Genesis, of Hagar and her son by Abraham, Ishmael, banished by Sarah and Abraham to the wilderness, and eventually met by and ultimately protected by God, we get this incredibly disturbing, even more unsettling account of Abraham heaven-bent to kill his son Isaac.

Because he believes – at least at first – that that's what God wants.

When we encounter stories like this one, it's easy to allegorize. And it can be useful.

In this case, we might come away, for example, with the provocative question: What in our lives are WE willing to sacrifice – that is, give up, let go of, leave behind – in order to be more faithful to God? More faithful to Love, to the call of Love on and in our lives.

How far are we willing to go? Not child sacrifice, of course, but are we, would we be, willing to sacrifice that which is most precious to us?

Remember that Jesus comes along later and offers his own provocative statements like, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.”

Are we willing, for example, to “sacrifice” our own families for the sake of Love? Not literally, but practically, functionally?

The early disciples left their families behind at Jesus' call. Jesus died on a cross. Martin Luther King Jr., like so many before and after him, risked and gave his life for the cause of love and justice – sacrificing himself, as it were, while very much also sacrificing his own family's well-being.

These are deep and important questions in the life of faith. And in the pursuit of love, as it plays out between our call to love God, love neighbor (even enemy) and love ourselves.

But with stories like this one, I think we miss a lot if we leave it there. As with Hagar's story, there is so much to unpack, so many layers to explore. I only scratched the surface last week, which is why I've been wondering if we might offer a Bible study just focused on Abraham, Sarah, Hagar and their children. More on that later.

For now, with this story, I find myself struck by Abraham's repeated response when called upon, "Here I am." Here I am.

We hear it three times in the story. First, at the start, responding to the apparent voice of God: "Abraham, Abraham!"

"Here I am."

Then responding to Isaac, as they're walking together to the site of Isaac's would-be sacrifice: "Father!"

"Here I am, my son." Wanting to be faithful to, present to, his son – even as he's preparing to kill him because, again, that's what he believes God wants him to do.

And finally, with Abraham, knife in hand, ready to kill his son – SLAUGHTER his son, as some translations suggest – the angel of God calls from heaven: "Abraham! Abraham!"

"Here I am."

"Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him ..."

I hear in this story Abraham longing to be faithful, but struggling to understand what that means. What that looks like. Faithful to what? To whom?

In the trajectory of the Biblical narrative and church tradition, Abraham is lifted up as the father of nations, celebrated for his extraordinary, apparently unflinching faithfulness – both here in his willingness to sacrifice his own son, his named heir, and eventually in his willingness to lead his family, his people, into an unknown – and for the record, occupied – promised land.

But faith can be complicated. I see Abraham earnestly wanting to be faithful, to show up, to be present and accounted for, to do the right thing.

“Here I am,” the archetypal response of faithful servants throughout the Biblical narrative – from Abraham to Abraham’s grandson, Jacob, to Moses, to Samuel, to Isaiah and the prophets. Here I am.

But Abraham, like all of us, is caught between faithfulness to his family, his tradition, his culture, and to his God, or at least the God of his understanding. His perception of what his God desires, what it means to be faithful to that God.

A God who, in Abraham’s mind and within the cultural understanding and religious practice of the day, desired sacrifice – literal, ritual sacrifice, even child sacrifice at times – to properly atone for the sins of the people.

This is the theological misunderstanding that informs the notion of “substitutionary atonement” in Christian tradition – the belief that Jesus’s sacrifice, Jesus’ death, was necessary to atone for our collective sins.

You know the logic – Jesus died in our place.

But that’s not how God works, at least not the God of Love. And that’s now how life works. Sin is real, we all know that. But it doesn’t need a supernatural magic trick to address it. It’s our job to turn back to Love.

Jesus was killed, executed by the State, in the cause of Love, Love that threatened the power of the religious and political status quo because it dared, HE dared, to insist that the viability of any KIN-dom is in how it treats its poorest, most vulnerable members.

That any KIN-dom content with ANYONE living on the margins, without full and equitable access to what they need to live and thrive, not just survive, should be dismantled from the top down. No justice, no peace!

Jesus was willing to die, to sacrifice his own life, for that vision. And in his death, confirmed that Love is stronger than fear and hate, even stronger than death. That life always has the last word.

But I digress. That's another sermon for another time. Easter, say.

Back to Abraham. With Ishmael, as we heard last week, Abraham seemed inclined to keep him with the family, but deferred to Sarah's wishes and to what he heard as the voice of God to send him and Hagar away.

Now with Isaac, traditional interpretation suggests – as the text, in fact, says – that God is testing Abraham, and plans to stop the sacrifice of Isaac at the last moment, which is, of course, what happens. Other interpretations imagine that God intends to go through with it, but it's Abraham's faithfulness, his willingness to go through with it, that converts God and changes God's mind.

Either way, theologically speaking, what kind of God would do that? What kind of God would manipulatively play anyone like that? What kind of God would put people to the test in the first place? What kind of God would demand such sacrifice?

What kind of God would put Abraham and, oh by the way, Isaac, through serious trauma as a test of faithfulness? And at that, wait until the last minute to spare Isaac's life and Abraham's conscience?

Going back to Hagar and Ishmael, what kind of God would let them wander in the wilderness to the brink of desperate, near-dead thirst and starvation, and ONLY THEN show up with a well of water?!

Not mine. And I hope not yours. Not the God of Love. God is not some outside actor, playing with us and our lives like puppets, intervening when and how God sees fit. That's a horror movie.

God IS in and around us, each of us, all of us, which is why Jesus reminds us that the kingdom of God begins within us, each of us, all of us.

I met Amy (for those who don't know, I'm talking about Amy, my partner, my wife); I met her when she was pastoring a small congregation in Brookhaven, just outside the city. Right on the border with Chester. A congregation Amy was told the Conference wanted to give one more shot to try and save – with Amy as the de facto savior. A set-up if ever there was one.

It was her first pastoral appointment after seminary in Atlanta, and she was by then a couple of years into it. And Amy will tell you that she was miserable. Lonely, single, in a new place, serving an older congregation, where she knew nobody but her aunt.

She threw herself into her work. And she will tell you that she was caught between her faithful belief that God was calling her to be there and to try to help save that church, AND her own lived experience of misery. Her faithfulness to God, or at least her perception at the time about what faithfulness to God looked like, meant that the call necessarily superseded her own well-being.

But then she had a revelation. She describes at one point crying and even yelling at God about being so miserable, wrestling with God with the biblical spin, and then suddenly realizing that it was not God she was yelling at, but herself. She was the one ignoring, or at least not prioritizing attention to, her own struggle and sacrifice for the sake of the church, not God.

She thought she was hearing God's voice, but that voice was muddled with other voices. God was NOT the One insisting she be miserable, demanding sacrifice. In fact, God was the One whose voice led her to leave that congregation. To discern more fully what shape Love, including love of herself, would take.

Stories like this one with Abraham and Isaac push us to develop our theologies. These kinds of stories – remember, intricate and layered stories – invite US to wrestle with God, with our understanding of God, with our theology.

Beyond allegory, what can, what might, we learn from such disturbing stories?

I make sense of this one, at least in part, by seeing Abraham as CAUGHT BETWEEN. Going all in, in a direction in which he is simply wrong from the beginning.

God, as the story goes, tests Abraham by telling him to offer Isaac as a burnt offering. But what if that's just what Abraham thinks he hears? The voice of God muddled together with the voices of tradition and obligation and duty and other people's expectations, in his head?

Abraham, by all accounts, is a people-pleaser. So consider, as with Amy's experience, that he's simply wrong in his certainty about what God asks of him.

And in the end, it IS the authentic voice of God that finally breaks through the muddle to finally spare him and Isaac? Just as it the authentic voice of God that finally breaks through the mess and shows Hagar the well of water in the wilderness.

The authentic voice of God, which is the voice of Love, which brings him back to the God who desires not sacrifice, NOT SACRIFICE, but mercy. As the prophets proclaim over and over again.

Mercy, not sacrifice. Justice, not sacrifice. Love, not sacrifice.

Now that's not to say that love does not require sacrifice on our parts. It does, of course, in big and small ways. When we love others, we inevitably sacrifice our time, our energy, our priorities, sometimes our own needs. Sometimes our lives. The degree of sacrifice is a matter for personal discernment, as it was for Jesus. As it was for King.

Love is hard, including of ourselves, but it comes with its own rewards. And faith can be complicated, confusing, muddled, but in the end, we are clearly called to be faithful to the Divine Way of Love. Faithfulness to anything less is not faithfulness at all.

Here I am. Here we are.

May it be so.