

## No Laughing Matter

His name meant “laughter.” When God told his father, Abraham, then 99, that a son would be born to him and his wife Sarah, then 90, Abraham fell on the ground, he laughed so hard. When Sarah herself heard the promise from three strange men at the oaks of Mamre, she hid in her tent and laughed. And when the boy was born, Sarah said, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.” In Hebrew, we can even hear the laughter in the name: Yitzhak – Yitza-a-a-a-k – Isaac.

But if you read the rest of Isaac’s story in Genesis, there doesn’t seem to be much laughter in it. We read of his grief at the death of his mother. There is an odd but tender love story in Isaac’s marriage to Rebekah, which we will consider next week, but it’s not a romantic comedy. Nor is Isaac’s later life any easier: his sons despise each other, one son conspires with Rebekah to deceive Isaac and cheat his brother, the other son enters into foolish marriages that bring grief to both Isaac and Rebekah. Ultimately, Isaac slips quietly from the stage of the Genesis saga, but this son of promise seems not to have enjoyed the quality that named him. Isaac’s life, it appears, is no laughing matter.

Perhaps the turn of his life came in the story I just read to you. The Jews call this tale “the Akedah, the Binding.” No less a thinker than the great Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard suggests that after the incident of the Akedah, neither Isaac nor his father ever laughed again. It is hardly a surprising conclusion, especially from the writer for whom some have appropriated the sobriquet first applied to Hamlet, “the Melancholy Dane.” The Akedah is one of the strangest stories in a book full of strange stories, at once terrifying and hopeful, cruel beyond belief and faithful beyond measure. Kierkegaard opens his famous treatment of this story in his 1843 book, *Fear and Trembling*, by admitting that he loved this story as a child and paradoxically, came to admire it more and more throughout his years while admittedly understanding it less and less. Perhaps that is the way it is supposed to be. I admit to a great deal of perplexity on my own part as I studied this story that is at once disturbing and reassuring. What was God up to? What was Abraham thinking? What messages are here for me, for us, in days and circumstances so far removed from this primitive tale? Can we ultimately receive the traditional interpretation of Jews, Christians and Muslims alike, that Abraham was, as Kierkegaard put it, a “knight of faith,” and that he provides an exemplar for all humankind?

Perhaps it would be helpful to consider at this point the cultural context for Abraham of the horrible practice of child sacrifice. We are well aware from the Law and history of Israel in the rest of the Old Testament that this practice was abhorred by God and God’s people alike. The practice is listed among the chief sins of Israel’s enemies. Indeed, archaeological evidence shows that, while child sacrifice was not common in most of the ancient Middle East, it was widely practiced in Canaan prior to the time of the Hebrew settlement. To Abraham, who has left the urban safety first of Ur and then of Haran at the behest of this strange, compelling God to come to this wild new land, it may seem very possible that he is being called to adopt the practices of the place to which God has called him. We know from the narration that this is God’s test of Abraham. We know from the end of the story that God will not let any harm come to the boy. But Abraham does not know these things. He only knows he is being called upon to sacrifice his laughing boy.

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He has, in some ways, already sacrificed a son, Ishmael, on the altar of Sarah's fear and greed. Yes, the Lord reassured him that the boy would fulfill a glorious destiny out in the desert, but Abraham can only take that on faith. There is no record of any contact between Ishmael and Abraham until the son came to bury his father. As far as Abraham knows, the young man is dead, leaving him only one son. Technically, by releasing Hagar, Ishmael's slave girl mother, and her son, Abraham has disowned the boy. Ishmael's part in the inheritance has been traded for his and his mother's freedom, inauspicious though its circumstances may be. After all those years of hearing from God that he will be the Father of Nations, Abraham has only the one heir, Isaac, and now he is being told to give him as a burnt offering.

All of this regarding Abraham's state of mind, of course, is speculation. All the story tells us is that Abraham rose early the next morning and took the necessary steps to comply with God's horrifying command. We cannot know what, if anything, passed between Abraham and Sarah that night or about the conversation between man, boy and servants on the journey. We cannot even know for certain where the journey took them, although tradition says that Mount Moriah was later known as Mount Zion, the site of the Temple in Jerusalem. We can know that when their destination was in sight, Abraham took the necessary implements and his son on ahead, leaving his servants with their pack animal and the words, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you." "...then we will come back to you." Is Abraham deliberately deceiving them so that they will not prevent what he believes he must do? Is he planning to disobey God at the very last, perhaps offering his own life for his son's? Or is he still holding out hope that the God who blessed him and his aged wife with the miracle of Isaac's birth will perform another miracle? Is he waiting for the skies to open and a voice to say the Hebrew equivalent of "You've been punked!?" Does he hope, as the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews suggests, that God will see his faithfulness and restore the boy's life after the dreadful deed has been done? Is he simply shut down in his grief and terror, denying the reality of what he is about to do. Once again, we cannot know.

Abraham takes the knife and the fire up the mountain, strapping the firewood on his son's back. It is an ironic and poignant picture. The father takes the potentially dangerous items, the ones his son might hurt himself with. But as Gordon Wenham points out in his commentary on this passage, "The wood on Isaac's back looks forward to the moment when Isaac will be lying on his back on the wood, with his father, knife in hand, ready to slay him." The idea of an innocent, about to be killed, walking that particular bit of Earth with wood on his back may raise another image for us. With no apparent intended irony, the *Genesis Rabbah*, a Jewish commentary on this passage written in the early centuries of the Common Era, comments that Isaac with the wood on his back is like a condemned man, carrying his own cross.

Just as we cannot know Abraham's thoughts, nor can we know what prompted Isaac's question, "where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Did the boy feel the weight of parental despair along with the wood on his back? Or was it still a grand adventure, an exciting outing with his beloved father? Commentators steeped in Biblical Hebrew make it clear that Isaac's address to Abraham, "My father," is as full of tenderness and love as the later "Abba" which Jesus used to refer to His Father. Abraham's reply is as oblique to us as the question: "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." Does he understand the lamb and the son to be the same gift from God? Is he prevaricating to reassure the boy? Or is he still hoping against hope that God has yet

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another surprise for his old friend? Grieving father, hopeful father or grimly determined father, trusting son, oblivious son or fearful son; the denouement is quickly prepared. The boy is bound, the blade is raised, the miracle comes.

Just as Abraham is proven faithful in this dark and frightening story, willing to follow the will of God no matter what the cost, even the greatest, so is the faithfulness of God proven in the fulfilled hope and mercy at the end of the episode. God does not desire the sacrifice of innocents, as the prophets tell us again and again in the centuries after Abraham. God desires that those who follow God do so without reservation, for when things look the most lost to them, that is when God provides. "God will provide," Abraham told his son or, in some translations, "God will see to it." "The Lord will provide," Abraham called that place, "Yahweh yireh," or as some recent popular gospel songs have phrased it, "Jehovah Jirah." As with so much of this story, it is an ambiguous phrase. "The Lord will provide" or "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided" can also be translated, "The Lord will see" or "The Lord will be seen." But what is not ambiguous is the promise: Yahweh God, the Creator of Heaven and Earth, keeps watch over the lives of God's people, inserts God's own presence into their lives and provides for them in their time of ultimate need.

I've mentioned before that scholars believe that the Book of Genesis came into its final form during the Babylonian Exile or in the early days of the Jews return to their Promised Land. Imagine, if you will, how this story and its promise must have been received by them, people who had lost their homes, their goods, neighbors, family, and were now trying to find the strength to carry on, either in a foreign land or in the shattered reality of the land of their dreams. Like Abraham, they had walked a long journey with death hanging over their heads. Like Abraham, they must have thought that their promised future was coming to a bleak end. Perhaps like Abraham, they hoped against hope that God had one more miracle for God's often faithless people. They were waiting on God to provide.

We are in a far different place than either Abraham or his beleaguered descendants. We are not obviously dependent for our day-to-day existence on the intervention of God. We are not strangers in a strange land. We have not moved thousands of miles with no idea of what awaits us. Our children, miraculous though they may seem to us, have not been born under the sort of extraordinary circumstances that attended Isaac's birth. So what does this haunting, disturbing, terrible and wonderful story say to us?

There are, as is almost always the case with the Bible, many truths that can be gleaned from this short, spare story. For some, it is all about Isaac. They would draw lessons regarding parents and children from this tale. For Esther Menn, Professor of Old Testament at Chicago's Luther School of Theology, Abraham is a bad father and this is a cautionary tale about confusing cultural norms with God's command. She writes that God intervenes out of a sense of deep disappointment in Abraham and out of God's ongoing desire to teach humankind to protect the helpless. "God appears," she writes, "as a responsive witness to a child's vulnerability and distress. "On a mount the LORD is seen," not to enjoy the "sweet odor" of a burnt offering, but to prevent violence against a bound child."

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Dr. Menn goes on to draw the parallel between the vulnerable Isaac and the plight of children in today's world. She points to "Neglect, violence, sexual abuse, poor education, homelessness, hunger... child labor and prostitution..." as threats to children that reveal how poorly we protect the most vulnerable among us. "The challenges to children today are so enormous," she writes, "that addressing them will take the commitment of all three Abrahamic faiths, in cooperation with other people of good will. Just as the first-born Israelites were redeemed by the payment of five shekels of silver, children today will be spared only by a shift of budgetary priorities and the investment of adequate financial resources. The precarious situation of children in today's world is a test for our faith, for our understanding of who God is and what God desires of us... As Christians our daily decisions and our political commitments need to be made in light of God's attentiveness to the child and of his command "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him"... whenever violence against a child is halted and whenever the needs and well-being of children receive attention, God is seen in that place."

Dr. Menn has pointed to a truth badly needed in our world, but there are more truths to be gleaned here. Continuing with the theme of the protection of our children is the idea of Paul Nuechterlein, a theologian whose thoughts I often find helpful. Nuechterlein challenges us to recognize the similarity between our own culture and the ancient Canaanites. "We still practice child sacrifice, do we not?" he asks. For Nuechterlein, this modern sin is most clearly traced to the practice of old men sending young men off to war, an old sacrifice to the new God of nationalism. He writes with intended irony, "'We must send our sons to fight for the freedoms we hold dear,' we say. 'The Constitution of the United States expresses a sacred truth that must be defended, even it is with the blood of our sons and daughters.'" I think Nuechterlein is correct but I also think he has chosen what may be too easy a target. His argument is less likely to be gainsaid in the midst of a hugely unpopular war. But what about the other ways, more subtle ways, in which we sacrifice our children? One pastor read this story to a group of children, then asked them if they understood what sacrifice meant. One little girl told of how her parents, both doctors, had to leave her in daycare for long hours every day so that they could, in her words, "help the sick people." But that little girl knew that it was she who was sacrificing, giving up her childhood so her parents could pursue their careers. And she knew that the sacrifice was not her choice. We may excuse the actions of those doctor-parents as they live out the calling to minister to the sick, but as a wise person told me during my seminary days, "your ministry should not be your god." If our true God does not ask for child sacrifice, why do we offer up so much of our children's lives to the altar of our careers, ministry-based or not? Rev. William Willimon writes, "How odd that we who make our homes and plant our gardens under the shadow of the mushroom cloud, who regularly discard our innocents in sacrifices to far lesser gods than Yahweh, should look condescendingly upon Abraham."

Rabbi Arthur Waskow, whose imaginative exchange between Ishmael and Isaac I read to you last week, offers a completely different view of the lesson of the Akedah as it relates to fathers and sons. Waskow writes, "The two strongest imperatives of Torah are: 1) Rear children; 2) Break idols. What happens when we turn our children into our idols?" Waskow has read between the lines of the story, looked at the society around him and seen that there is every bit as much danger in elevating our offspring to the place reserved in our lives for God as there is in not giving them enough room in our hearts and minds. I think of the parents who believe that their children can do no wrong, who shelter them from criticism and never allow them to see that

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actions have consequences. For parents who have waited long years for a first child, the child is often so precious to them that they lose perspective. Surely, Abraham and Sarah would have been ripe for this sort of idolatry.

We may make idols from our children, from our careers, from our country. We may even make an idol of our own capabilities, which are really gifts from God. So the question becomes not only, "To what idol are we ready to sacrifice our children, our relationships, our health," but also, "Do we put our faith in the gift rather than in the giver?" Should we put our faith in something other than God, we can be sure that faith will be misplaced. Generally, the exigencies of daily life will point out the fallacy of faith in anything other than God. We should hope that the lesson will be gentle but it often is not. That is why Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "lead us not into temptation," or put more bluntly, "do not put us to the test." Our prayer is "God please don't test us as you did Abraham. We could not stand it."

But if Jesus taught us to ask God to let the test pass us by, he also taught that we must be faithful even in extremis. Jesus taught us that following him means taking up our cross, that whoever would save his life will lose it but that whoever is willing to lose her life for Jesus' sake will find it. Just as on Mount Moriah, God gave Abraham back the son that Abraham was willing to sacrifice to God, just as in the garden on the outskirts of Jerusalem, God gave back to Jesus the life he'd offered up to God on Calvary's hill, so, too, God will be faithful to provide for us when we offer ourselves in faith to God.

That wonderful preacher, William Willimon, whom I quoted earlier, has this to say about Abraham and his relevance to our time: "No stranger to the ways of the real God, Abraham would know that a mad, disordered, barbaric age needs more than a faith with no claim but that its god can be served without cost. How puny is this orderly, liberal religion before the hard facts of life. The sky darkens, the wind howls and a young man walks up another Moriah, driven by a God who demands everything and who stops at nothing. He carries a cross on his back rather than sticks for a fire, but like Abraham, he is obedient to a wild and restless God who is determined to have his way with us, no matter what the cost."

Do we have the faith of Abraham, the faith to trust in our faithful God no matter what the circumstances seem to be? Are we ready, like Jesus, to follow God's will for our lives, no matter what? Are we ready, within the safety of our camp or atop the terrifying mountain of sacrifice, to say to God, "Here I am?" It may be no laughing matter.