



Sometimes we run across someone who doesn't go to church and who says he doesn't believe in God. How to respond to her can be troubling. You might try asking: "Tell me about this God you don't believe in?" You might be surprised by the answers and perhaps a good conversation comes out of that encounter.

So tell me about this God you don't believe in? I, for one, don't believe in a God that requires human – or even animal- sacrifices. Even though I know the meaning of sacrifice is to make something holy. To be set apart for a special task or call. The God I believe

in loves each of us and so would not ask me – or you- to kill my child or my pet just to prove that I trust God.

What, then, are we to make of today's reading about Abraham and Isaac – and oh yes, God? There are at least these three main participants plus other lesser ones such as the young men/servants who accompany Abraham and Isaac and the donkey who carries the wood and supplies. And let's not forget Sarah, Isaac's mother who is conspicuously absent from this account.

We can't ignore this story just because we don't like it. Scripture we don't like calls us to wrestle with it to discern what important truths or lessons it might be telling us today. I haven't had the chance, but sometime I would like to talk about this passage with someone who believes the Bible is literally, factually, true in each jot and tittle. That God physically wrote down these words and that we are not to question what they mean. I can't get my head around a faith that says "don't question." It seems to me the human condition is questioning- after all, that's how our great inventions and scientific progress come about- we question, we ponder, we discern, and finally, hopefully, we come to some resolution at least for a time. My comments today are just one approach to considering this passage. They are by no means the only interpretation.

For starters, consider Abraham. The beginning of what we read about Abraham is that he heard God's voice to get up and go. Get up and go to the land that God will tell you. And he did. There's no indication that Abraham argued with God about not having all the details. What we have is that Abraham heard God's instruction to get up and go and he did. And Abraham came to live in a place that was conducive to life and Abraham and his companions prospered.

We also read that God or three messengers or angels came to visit with Abram and Sarai on the plains of Mamre. And Abraham and Sarah were told that they would have a son in their old age.

Genesis 22:1-14; Ps. 13; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42

And they laughed but God reminded Abraham and Sarah that nothing is impossible for God. And in due time they do have a son, Isaac.

And then we have the encounter between God and Abraham over what to do about Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham pleads with God to spare the inhabitants of Sodom if 50 righteous people could be found. And they negotiate down to if 10 righteous people are found then God will not destroy the cities.

So far, things are going along pretty well. God and Abraham have worked out a good relationship. God has assured Abraham that they have a covenant. The essence of the covenant is that God will care for Abraham and his descendants and Abraham will trust in God. The next thing we read is that God calls to Abraham who responds: "Here I am." God says, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about."

Gulp. Do you really mean it God? Do you really mean that now that Ishmael has been sent away you now want me to offer up Isaac as a burnt sacrifice? Surely not! God, you are asking too much. How will I ever explain this to Sarah? How will I live with killing the son of my old age – the one you promised to me- the one through whom you have told me will be my descendants down through the ages? This simply can't be!

Abraham, though, does not cry out to God about injustice or cruelty or refuse to act. Abraham seems simply to have packed what was needed, loaded it on the donkey, called to his two servants and Isaac and begun to walk. They walked together and on the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. And so they part- the servants and the donkey remain behind while Abraham and Isaac walk on together. Abraham leaves the servants with the words: "we will come back to you."

Abraham then takes the wood and laid it on Isaac while Abraham carries the fire and the knife. And the two of them walked on together. Finally, Isaac asks: "where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" The 64-thousand dollar question. Abraham replies with what has been true in his life since he first listened to God: "God will provide." And they walk on together and get to the place that God shows Abraham and Isaac is bound upon the altar and Abraham's hand is raised to kill his son, his only son, the one whom he loves- when God calls out: Abraham, Abraham! And Abraham replies: "Here I am." The response of faith: "Here I am."

And God tells Abraham to release Isaac and kill the ram caught in a thicket instead. And Abraham names the place "The Lord will provide."

Did Abraham know from the beginning that God would provide an alternative to Isaac for sacrifice? We don't know but we do know that Abraham's experiences with God had been positive to this point. God had provided directions to the land where Abraham was to go. God had provided a son, in Isaac, that represented the fulfillment of the covenant that Abraham would live on through his own blood.

Genesis 22:1-14; Ps. 13; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42

Side note: Abraham also lives on through his son Ishmael but that's another story for another Sunday.

God had listened to Abraham at the time of Sodom and Gomorrah so perhaps Abraham didn't protest the direction to sacrifice Isaac because Abraham had experience of God's mercy and believed that God would provide as it turned out God did.

Did Abraham know this was a test of his faithfulness to God? Was this for Abraham a test of God's faithfulness? After all, Abraham replied to Isaac that God would provide the lamb for sacrifice, so God had better ante up when the time came!

Terence Fretheim¹ says that "testing must be considered relationally, not legalistically. Life in relationship will inevitably bring tests... what constitutes testing will be determined by the nature of the relationship and the expectations the parties have for it... We should learn from this story that receiving promises does not entail being protected from moments where those promises seem to be called into question."

He also asks us to consider what happens when promises are fulfilled and how such fulfillment impacts our relationship with God. Abraham had received what God had promised: land, life of plenty, a son and the expectation that his descendants would number more than the stars and the grains of sand upon the beach. Based on his past relationship with God, Abraham had a firm foundation to believe that God would provide even though at the time, he likely didn't see how it would come to pass. Given that God had provided Abraham's deepest desires, it would have been human to say, "no" when God tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Will Abraham keep God at the center of his life now that Abraham has what he has always wanted? Abraham responds as he does because he does trust God.

And God learns that God can trust Abraham. "Now I know." Katherine Schifferdecker believes "that this story does not subscribe to later notions of God's perfect omniscience. This is a genuine test, and Abraham is free to decide what he will do. God neither knows nor pre-ordains how Abraham will respond. Reading this story with a hermeneutic of generosity, one could argue that God imposes this one-time test on Abraham because God has risked everything on this one man, and God needs to know if he is faithful."²

Abraham honors the pledge of the covenant even to giving up the life he valued most of all, his son, his only son, Isaac, the one whom he loved. We are not told that Abraham's faith increased but rather that his faith in God was confirmed. Abraham believes that God has his best interests at heart, even when Abraham does not understand and may be called to sacrifice that which he loves best. The way God will interact with humankind is shaped, in part, by Abraham's willingness to follow God.

Some Jewish commentators note that human sacrifice was prevalent among other peoples at this time. What is important is that God stopped the sacrifice, not that God commanded it. This

¹ Terence Fretheim. "The Book of Genesis" in *the New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994) 494-501.

² Katherine Schifferdecker. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2138 6/28/14).

Genesis 22:1-14; Ps. 13; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42

supports the view that God abhors human sacrifice. This view is supported by texts in Leviticus, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Another view is that Abraham misheard God. What God asked, in this strand of thought, is that God wanted a spiritual sacrifice and not a human sacrifice. I like that interpretation although Abraham apparently had not had trouble hearing God's voice before, so I'm not sure that argument holds up.

However you work your way through some of these knotty questions, one image we need to wrestle with is the title of this passage in Judaism: "the binding of Isaac." Isaac was the one upon whom Abraham had placed his hopes and dreams for descendants. Isaac was bound before birth with those expectations whether he agreed or not.

Abraham loads the wood for the sacrificial fire on Isaac's back to carry on when the servants and the donkey are left behind. What expectations are we bound with by our families or daily life that we didn't ask for and maybe we wish weren't there?

We do have free choice. We can carry – we can be bound up – with this or that. We carry the instruments of our destruction within us – be it addictions to drugs, alcohol or other substances or things; being self-absorbed; habits that are not health-giving or many other things. Our bindings are unique to us. They differ from person to person. What is a burden to you may not be for me and vice versa. We can also choose to be unbound, not always easily or quickly. Sometimes it is a day-to-day, day-by-day struggle to stay clean and sober or to get to work on time when our children or our parents need our time and attention. You know what binds you and that from which you can become unbound. Before we simply toss off what binds us, take a moment to think about what it will mean to be unbound. Ask yourself from you are unbinding and to what you are going. And ask yourself where God is in your life.

God provided for Abraham and Sarah and Isaac. God will provide for you and for me. Not always as we might wish but God is always with us.

And now, back to the God who asked for human sacrifice and who provided a ram in a thicket to substitute for Isaac. The unsung hero of this story is the ram in the thicket and a poem by Yhuda Amichai.

The True Hero of the Akedah – by Yehuda Amichai

The true hero of the Akedah was the ram
 Who did not know about the pact among the others.
 It was as if he volunteered to die in place of Isaac.
 I want to sing, for him, a memorial song,
 About the curly wool and the mortal eyes
 About the horns that stood silent on its living head.
 After the slaughter, they were made into shofars
 To sound the blast of their wars
 And to sound the blast of their base celebrations.

I want to remember that final image –

Genesis 22:1-14; Ps. 13; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42

Like a pretty photograph in a fancy fashion magazine:
The tanned, pampered youth in his finest of frocks
And by his side, the angel, dressed in a long silk gown
As if for a festive reception.
And the two of them, with desolate eyes,
Looking out to two distant desolate places.

And behind them, as a colorful background, the ram
Entangled in the thicket before slaughter--
The thicket, his final friend.

The angel departed homewards
Issac departed homewards
And Abraham and God had parted ways a while back.

But the true hero of the Akedah
Was the ram.

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Thanks be to God. Amen.