

Pentecost 4A, Proper 8. Genesis 22. July 2, 2017.

A famous book about this story from Genesis is called “Fear and Trembling.” I have my doubts about the book, but the title, I think, is exactly right. Whenever I read this story, I have a feeling like I’m trespassing somehow. As if I’ve opened God’s medicine cabinet, or accidentally seen Abraham in the bathtub. We have seen in this story something sacred and strange and vulnerable, something we shouldn’t have seen. It *should* be approached with fear and trembling, and not just because of that feeling of trespass. But also because if we don’t take the easy way of explaining it away quickly (which is easy enough to do), then this story ushers us into the hardest questions we can ask as people of faith. Is it possible for God to command evil? How easy is it for us to do evil in God’s name? What if God is not at all what we thought God to be? How much are we willing to give for what we believe in, and what is it really that we believe in most? Or, the same question, really: what would it take for us to betray everything we believe in?

That’s quite a few questions of the kind that we carry with us throughout our lives, and is probably too many questions for one sermon. Deacon Sue once told me that on the Jewish holy day of Rosh Hashanah, it is a custom in some communities to bring together like ten rabbis, all of whom have to preach on this text. At first I thought, how awful. What if your sermon is the worst one? But after spending all week with this text, I think that sounds about right. Because it is inexhaustible in its richness, ambiguity, sparse beauty, and finally, its horror.

I want to enter into that horror for a moment and instead of trying to smooth it out for us, to see if it will illumine the horrors that we face in our own lives. The horror of the story that is pressing on me is a moral one. It is the situation of a person faced with absolutely incompatible absolute goods in a world that is somehow broken, a world that has tragedy somewhere near its root. I don’t usually think that this is the true nature of God’s world, but the story forces us to reckon with the experience of two absolutes that are in absolute conflict.

For Abraham, these absolutes are obedience to the God for whose promises he has risked everything again and again, and the absolute mandate that he care for, or at least not kill, his son. And this second mandate, by the way, can also be underwritten as obedience to God, the god who has already saved one son, Ishmael, whom Abraham cast out. Both are irreducible, deep-as-the-foundation-of-the-world goods and if pursuing one excludes pursuing the other, then there’s a rift at the heart of reality.

God help us, I think we can probably avoid the specific choice Abraham has to make. But if we are paying attention then we certainly find ourselves often enough faced with the apparent incompatibility of two things that are both obviously good. Or two conflicting causes to which we owe loyalty. Or, the reverse of the same problem: we find ourselves faced with two bad options and seem to have to choose between them. The root problem is that the good is too often not apparent to us, and yet we have to choose anyway. We can all name less dramatic examples than Abraham’s. For me, the most common struggle between two goods is trying to balance the work here that I feel God and you have called me to do with being meaningfully present to my family. Or what do we do with our money: give to St. Christopher’s, or support cancer research or a fledgling public mental health clinic. Or more poignant situations: a parent is dying, and a child is

sick. A partner is feeling neglected, while a dear friend is going through a painful divorce.

Our most difficult moral decisions are not choosing between good and evil—they are choosing between good and good, when we cannot choose both, and there will be suffering somewhere because of how we choose. Now, Abraham's binding of Isaac will not give us a blueprint to guarantee that we always choose rightly, but it can give us some clues—or at least some guiding questions—to help us know how to conduct ourselves in these situations.

The first question it asks of us is: do we show up, when times are tough? Whatever we may think of how Abraham conducted himself in this terrible situation, he shows up. If God's refrain throughout the story is "your son, your only son," then Abraham's is "Here I am." Three times he says it: twice to God and once to Isaac. This is a perennial temptation when neither option will solve all of our problems: to hide. But even as he seems to be choosing the good of obeying God, against the good of caring for his son, Abraham does not hide from Isaac. When Isaac calls to him, just as when God calls to him, he says "Here I am." I think it must have been some of the hardest words he ever said: "Here I am, my son." I am about to kill you, but here I am, and you are my son. It's grotesque, but it is also brave and I think that it is a kind of example for the Christian life: we show up, no matter how difficult it is to do so.

And the second question is when we are stuck in a terrible dilemma, what is it that we are looking for? If the drama of this story weren't so titillating, it would be easier to see that it is in many ways a story about seeing and showing. Abraham is to go to a mountain that God will show him, eventually he sees the place that God has shown him in the distance, he looks up, he comes to the place that he has been shown, and finally, he looks up and sees the ram that will be the eventual sacrifice. Seeing, looking, and being shown.

I don't know about you, but in my experience my vision is the first thing to get clouded when I realize that I have a problem that I cannot solve. As viable options narrow, I begin to lose the ability to imagine something new; I forget to look for the thing that I am not expecting. This—the thing that we are not expecting—is of course exactly what we want to come in these situations. The sudden and unexpected coming of salvation. We cannot expect it, but we can train ourselves to keep looking for it. Abraham spends this entire story looking and seeing, learning to see God's activity in even the most awful circumstances. God's activity—or, in other words: GRACE.

It is not the case that everything is okay. It is not the case that no one will get hurt. We know that sometimes we get caught between two goods, and that our choices have an impact on whose pain gets alleviated, and whose pain may worsen. The Christian life, my friends, is not a life of uninterrupted bliss and moral certitude. But it is a life of courage and imagination. It is a life in which hope does not die, in which hope reaches beyond our unsolvable situation, in which hope reaches even beyond death. It is a life that is shaped by that greatest hope: that all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well. It is not an expectation. It is something much stronger—it is hope. May we always be looking for it.