

“The Illusion of Certainty”

July 2, 2023

Scripture: Genesis 22:1-14

This is a very dark and disturbing story. Whatever else we might make of it, on its face this story is a problem. Starting from its title, really. In Jewish tradition it's called “Akedah,” which is Hebrew for “binding.” The focus is on the moment when Abraham takes Isaac and ties him up to place him on the altar. Odd, though, that it isn't called “nasah,” which means “tested.” Because the binding would never have happened if God hadn't tested Abraham. This isn't Abraham's idea; he's responding to God's orders.

I don't know about you, but that sort of bugs me. Why would God issue an order like that? What kind of God is this? The story doesn't go into any of that; it just offers this portrayal of God as capricious, some might say sadistic, willing to toy with Abraham's emotions to satisfy some idle curiosity. After all, hadn't Abraham already proven himself? He left his ancestral home, he waited for years for offspring, he did everything God asked of him. So, why this? Why now?

A lot of the commentaries I've read about this story are determined to rationalize God's role in it and leave the burden on Abraham. Some commentators extol Abraham for his unwavering faith, possibly even believing that God would not actually allow him to carry it out. Others condemn Abraham for failing to stand up to God and refusing to do it. Still others believe Abraham is the epitome of self-sacrifice in this story, believing the purpose of the story is to teach us the depth of sacrifice religion requires. I understand that. We may be better off letting God off the hook for this. But it still raises a lot of questions about God.

I've mentioned in the past that many scholars believe these stories in Genesis and the other books of the Torah were compiled and written down during the time when Israel was in exile in Babylon. The trauma of that experience, of being ripped from their home country and force-marched to a foreign land, their sacred city, Jerusalem, ravished and the holy temple destroyed, left the survivors feeling completely abandoned by God. So, the stories they told about their ancestors became for them a type of therapy. Through the stories of the first couple, the brothers Cain and Abel, the destruction of the flood, the calling of Abraham and Sarah, these exiles were working out their grief and struggling to find a way to reconnect to God.

A story like this one, that comes at the very end of Abraham's saga, after everything seems to have finally resolved and they can live happily ever after, may serve as a reminder that nothing is certain. Just as the residents and leaders of Jerusalem once believed their world was secure only to have it crumble around them, so Abraham is faced with the loss of everything he had lived for all those years. It's as if the exiles are telling themselves, and future generations, to never forget certainty is an illusion that can shatter at any moment.

On our bulletin covers this morning we have a picture of “Dome of the Rock” in Jerusalem. It's the site on which the Jewish temple was built. It's also believed to be the place where Mohammad, the prophet of Islam, was taken up into heaven. It's a sacred place for Jews

and Christians and Muslims. Tradition also holds that it is the place where Abraham built the altar to sacrifice Isaac. That may sound a little ghoulish to some of you, but it may be a way to affirm both the illusion of certainty and God's provision when it collapses.

Another tradition associated with that spot calls it the "axis mundi," the center of the world or navel of the universe. It is the place where creation began. There are many places in the world considered axis mundi by traditions. They are those places where heaven and earth come into very close contact, where we encounter the Divine in a special way. We can see why this story of near loss of everything and last moment rescue by God would be associated with that spot. We could even say it represents a reality common to all people. The promise of harmony and wholeness, such as Abraham saw fulfilled in the birth of Isaac, is fragile. Our security is tenuous and always under threat of slipping away from us if we're not mindful, if we don't nurture it.

This week, for instance, we're celebrating our national independence. On July 4th, we remember the signing of our first sacred document as a nation, the Declaration of Independence. In it, our founders affirmed a value our country holds very deeply and has the potential to ensure justice and peace: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." It was a dramatic thing to sign that document and it wasn't done lightly but only after much agonizing debate. Yet even then the certainty it asserted was an illusion. Every man who signed it knew full well there was a large population of people in the colonies who were enslaved and they had no intention of changing that condition. And there were, even then, voices of women advocating to be included in that extension of rights but were ignored.

Four score and seven years later their illusion would be shattered completely and the hopes of security and peace nearly lost. There has always been in our country an element of people willing to sacrifice certain of our sisters and brothers in the belief that some kind of divine order requires it. We can never take for granted the harmony that comes with equity and justice; we have to guard it and nurture it if we want it to thrive. Nothing created by us is certain or absolute; the most vulnerable among us, like the child Isaac, will always be at risk for sacrifice.

That's what I take from this story, anyway. I believe it carries both a promise and a warning. The promise is the future God desires for Abraham, a future of prosperity and security, a future promised for us by extension, is important to God and God will provide what we need to secure it. But be warned: there will always be the temptation to sacrifice the least among us either as a display of loyalty or out of convenience or even because we're convinced that certain people aren't worthy. When we give in to that temptation we may not always hear the angel calling us to stop.

I realize it's not the cheeriest message to hear on a holiday weekend. We're just beginning summer, after all, why be so gloomy? Stories in the Bible have a way of pulling us back to reality just as we're about to live the dream. God doesn't shy away from meeting us where we really are; we're not meant to escape the real world, but do what we can to transform it. That's why this morning I've chosen to celebrate this Agape Meal with you.

The Agape Meal is an ancient Christian tradition. It's a love feast. It's a celebration of our unity as children of God and our commitment to the love God has taught us to live through the life and ministry, the death and resurrection of Jesus. This isn't the same as communion; it's meant to be broader and more inclusive than that. An Agape Meal is a way to acknowledge our common condition, regardless of what religious tradition we practice or even if we practice none at all. We're all welcome at this feast because we are all children of the earth, sisters and brothers in the family of God.

This meal is my response to the question that looms over the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac: What does this tell us about God? I believe what the Israelites in exile were hoping to convey through this story is the recognition that God understands how precarious life is, that anything we think is certain is an illusion. And our only remedy is to be fully present to God and mindful of one another. Our hope lies in our capacity to see each other as divine, as sacred, to love each other in ways that appreciate the struggles and joys that make us who we are. When we join in this feast, when we taste and see, in spite of all the portrayals to the contrary, that God is good, we open ourselves to God's call, not to test us but to mold us. Because, while the certainty we like to cling to may be an illusion, the love we share even when that illusion fades is not. So, let's cling to love when all else fails us and bring God's love to life, our life, here and now.

Amen