

Abraham Binds His Son for Sacrifice — What?!

The Rev. Duane H. Fickeisen and Rachel Teates¹
Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley
November 14, 2010

*For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings*
Hosea 6:6

Opening Words² Rachel Teates

Today we are going to be looking at the Genesis story of the binding and potential sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham and the intervention by God to stop it.

This story is one of the hardest passages in the Bible to understand. Why as a modern people do we need to pay attention to and understand a story from the Hebrew scriptures that was written thousands of years ago? The story is perplexing and when first read, may simply seem to be a test of Abraham's faith...God demands that Abraham bring him a sacrifice, but will he obey?



¹The Rev. Duane H. Fickeisen is parish co-minister and Rachel Teates is a lay Worship Associate of the Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley, PO Box 207, Boiling Springs PA 17007; 717/249-8944; www.uucv.net.

² ©2010 Rachel Teates, Boiling Springs, PA

However, like a dream, this story has many layers. What else does this story mean? What does it mean to you in your life? It's hard to imagine that anyone would take this story literally today. It may also be hard to imagine that this story has anything to offer to us. I mean, who would be willing to literally sacrifice his or her own child to satisfy a deity? But there might be a time in our lives when we would sacrifice our loved ones for pleasures that lure us...material possessions, drugs and alcohol or money for instance.

This passage of scripture clearly has many more questions than answers. The biggest question for me about this scripture is why Isaac didn't try to get away from Abraham? Why was he so passive and willing to be sacrificed? I know if it was me I'd be trying to get as far away as possible. And why was Abraham so willing to sacrifice Isaac. That doesn't sound like very good parenting.

So this morning, we invite you to reflect on this story and see where it might fit into your own life. And like any good UU, I suspect it's meaning will be different for everyone.

Come, let us worship together.

Readings

Genesis 22:1-19
Deuteronomy 30:19

Sermon³

Duane Fickeisen

Let me set a scene for you. A group of us, together with folks from Second Presbyterian Church in Carlisle traveled to Honduras to help the Chorti people in the community of Nuevo

³ ©2010 Duane H. Fickeisen, Boiling Springs, PA

San Isidro build houses.

The skills and labor we brought paled in comparison with the Chorti. I could carry two cement blocks on my shoulder — they managed five. I was puffed climbing the hill to the site of several of the houses. They walked up barely breaking a sweat. The money we brought to buy materials and our presence in solidarity with the community were our primary contributions.

Our first full day was Sunday and we had asked to join the community in worship. We rode a half hour in an old school bus over very rough mountain roads from our comfortable B&B in Copan Ruinas. There were 22 seats on the bus and 24 of us, so two had to perch on the tools and supplies in the back of the bus where the last couple rows of seats had been removed to make room for gear. The remaining seats were spaced for sixth graders — our knees were mashed against the back of the seat in front of us. Good thing we were wedged in since there were no seat belts.

We arrived at the end of the road and were greeted by the few folks in the village who had not walked into Copan for a Protestant worship service, and we climbed up the steep, dusty mountain road in the warm sun to the chapel where the Catholic families awaited our arrival, which was announced by beating a stick against an old truck wheel rim hanging from a tree.

Inside the dark mud hut, we sat in the back on benches as the lay-led worship began. The lectionary readings for the day included the Genesis story of Abraham and Isaac.

Then came the exegesis of the story, the *Akedat Yitzchak* — the tale of the binding of his son, Isaac, by Abraham in order to sacrifice him. I have always found it puzzling and struggle to accept the interpretation that it represents God's testing Abraham's faith — why would Abraham do this most outrageous

thing in obedience to his perception of God's demand?

As Rachel suggested, the story poses more questions than answers. I offer it today, in part because of the lessons offered by the story itself and our understanding of it, and in part as an example of how we might read and grapple with parts of Scripture that we find difficult and challenging.

Like dreams, the best religious stories are rich and layered in meaning. Each element in the story offers an opportunity for nearly unlimited exploration as we unfold meaning from the images, plot, characters, and language. And this particular story, of Abraham and Isaac, has inspired rich interpretations and embellishments. I hope it inspires you to dig deeply into how it relates to your own life.

In dream work, and I suggest also in interpreting scripture, the test of which of many possible understandings has meaning for you lies in the "Ah ha!" experience. Which parts of the story draw your attention? Which seem the most puzzling to you? What in the story links with your own personal experiences? Which seem particularly troubling? When do you experience an "Ah ha!" moment?

As the images of the story suggest possible interpretations and meanings, pay attention to your visceral response. Those that bring about resonance and those that cause you to react with resistance are likely the parts with particular meaning for you.

They are the ones to pursue with attention to "So what does this mean to me, now?" In dreamwork, even the most difficult images always come in the service of health and wholeness.

It is important to place the story in the context of Abraham's biography and in the culture of the time. He is a major figure in the first book of the Pentateuch, those first five books

of the Bible.

Abram (as he is known early in his life) was descended from Adam through Noah. His genealogy is laid before us in detail. He married his half-sister, Sarai (later referred to as Sarah), who was infertile, despite God's promise that Abram would father a multitude that would become a great nation.

Abram moved around frequently, settling in many different places, but never apparently for long. Twice he denied his marriage to Sarai, claiming she was (only) his sister, offering her to Pharaoh in exchange for a rich dowry, and later to another king.

As was the custom then, when she was unable to conceive, Sarai offered her maid, Hagar, to Abram as a surrogate mother. When Hagar became pregnant, Sarai abused her and sent her away. Abram stood by passively. After Hagar returned, she bore Abram's son, Ishmael.

When God threatens to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah out of his anger at the wickedness there, Abraham (God had changed his name) negotiates with God that if there are a certain number of righteous men the cities will be spared. Starting at 50, the bidding ends at the need for 10 righteous men to save the cities. God at least temporarily spares them.

Then some 20 years later, to fulfill a promise God had made, Sarah (as she was then known) became pregnant and bore Isaac. Hagar and Ishmael were sent off again, and again Abraham failed to intervene — he did not even speak to them before they left.

Abraham has a mixed record. He has obeyed God's commands to relocate many times, shown hospitality to family and strangers, and argued with God for justice. But he has also lied repeatedly to protect himself, offered his wife to others twice (and benefitted from a rich dowry), abandoned Hagar

and Ishmael twice, and stood by while Sarah abused Hagar. It would be fair to say he was a pretty nasty misogynist — at least by our standards.

Then God decides to test his faith, and that's where the story of the binding of Isaac comes in.

The plot is pretty straightforward. Abraham hears God's voice telling him to take Isaac up on the mountain and sacrifice him as a burnt offering. Abraham took two of his men and Isaac, along with wood for the fire and the fire starter, and traveled three days with a donkey.

Leaving the two men and the donkey behind, Abraham told them to wait while he and Isaac went up the mountain to worship. He loaded the wood on Isaac's back. On the way up Isaac asked where the lamb was for the burnt offering. Abraham replied that God would provide it and they continued.

At the appointed site, Abraham laid the fire and bound Isaac and laid him on the wood. Then he took out his knife and — just as he was poised to kill Isaac — an angel appeared and ordered him not to harm his son.

Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught in a thicket and sacrificed it instead of Isaac. Then Abraham returned to his men and traveled to Beer-sheba, where he lived.

It's a simple story. But the plot makes us to wonder why Abraham would be willing to sacrifice his son and why God would put him through this horrific test. Perhaps you wonder why Abraham didn't negotiate on the side of justice — he certainly didn't hesitate to argue with God about the potential destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, after all. Or why Isaac was so passive and didn't challenge his father or struggle to escape.

In one of the many embellishments of the story, Isaac begged his father to bind him tightly lest he flinch at the knife

blade, suggesting that he was a willing, in fact an eager, participant in the sacrifice. In some cultures, including among the Maya, from whom the Chorti people in Nuevo San Isidro are descended, it was an honor to be chosen for sacrifice — a privilege that candidates might fight to attain.

The details offer additional questions, both in what is included and what is left out of the story. Why are Abraham's two men in the story? Why does Abraham tell them "*we will come back to you?*" Did he already know that Isaac would not actually be killed? When he answered Isaac's question on the trail that God would provide the lamb for the offering, did he already know that a last-minute substitution would be made or was he simply avoiding the truth (remember that Abraham has a history of lying when he's in a difficult situation)? Did he think the "lamb" God provided was Isaac?

And why did only Abraham return to his men, even after having told them "*we will come back to you?*" Where did Isaac go after the incident?

At three points in the story reference is made to "*your son, your only son.*" If that son was Isaac, what about Ishmael? Since later on Isaac is identified as inheriting the covenant from God to produce a great nation, is this a signal that Ishmael has been disinherited? Certainly he has been sent away, and without any objection from Abraham. Had Abraham already sacrificed Ishmael and his mother?

While I have thought of Isaac as a young boy or a youth in the story, some scholars have argued that he was around 30 years old. This is based on Sarah's death in the next few verses, where her age is given as 127. She had been living apart from Abraham and perhaps they had separated out of her being upset that Abraham was willing to sacrifice their son. If her death came soon after the binding, then Isaac would have been much older than a child.

Most of us would not lie still under the threat of being killed by our fathers. But perhaps being sacrificed was viewed by Isaac as an honor, or he placed extremely high value on obedience to his father and trust in his actions.

The majority of Jewish commentators interpret the story as a test of Abraham's loyalty — would he actually carry out God's command? He passed the test by demonstrating his willing compliance. But others offer alternatives — Abraham was led astray by his imagination and it was never really God's intent that Isaac be slaughtered. Some lift up the ordinariness of human sacrifice in the culture and suggest that what is astounding about the story is the angel's intervention to prevent the killing as a signal to the community that the practice is abhorrent. One interpretation is that the episode represents punishment of Abraham for having mistreated Ishmael. Others claim that the one being tested was Isaac — would he willingly offer himself as the sacrifice? Still another understanding of the story is that it was Abraham who was testing God. Would God intervene to prevent him from killing the son who was to inherit the promise of generating a great nation, even though Isaac was not yet married and had no children?

Christian commentators view the story as a precursor to the sacrifice of God's own son. The author of the Christian scripture book of Hebrews suggests that Abraham believed that after he killed Isaac God would resurrect him and bring him back to life. In fact some embellishments of the story say that Abraham actually did cut Isaac and that the angel used drops of dew to bring him back to life — causing Abraham to kill him again and that he didn't stop until a second resurrection.

Christian commentators see Isaac's willingness to be slaughtered as foreshadowing the story of the crucifixion of

Jesus, even pointing out that both Isaac and Jesus carried wood to the mountain, and they place the event on Calvary rather than on Temple Mount. Both are parts of Mount Moriah, where the text says the event took place.

Muslim interpreters claim the story is a test of both Abraham and his son (most believe it was Ishmael, not Isaac who was taken to the mountain). Both father and son prove their worthiness by submitting to God's will and demonstrating recognition that God is the owner and giver of all we cherish, including life and offspring. They place the event on the mount Marwah, which is linked to the Biblical Moriah. Marwah is just outside the Kabaa and during the annual pilgrimage there (the haj, which begins today), Muslims celebrate Eid al-Adha, a sacrifice festival in commemoration of the story when an animal is sacrificed and roasted, and the meat shared with the needy. Eid al-Adha will be celebrated on Tuesday this week.

Woody Allen offers a tongue-in-cheek interpretation that sees the episode as a practical joke, testing not Abraham's faith, but his gullibility. God asks, "Doth thou listen to every crazy idea that comes thy way? I jokingly suggest thou sacrifice Isaac and thou immediately runs out to do it. ... No sense of humor! I can't believe it!"

And finally an interpretation that made very good sense to me was offered by the lay Catholic leader in Neuvo San Isidro. The lay preacher said to the assembled congregation, in Spanish, of course, "We do not have the faith of Abraham. We would not sacrifice any of our sons — or our daughters. Instead we sacrifice ourselves for our sons and daughters." It was so true. These people had taken huge risks — of personal harm and even death — to gain the land they occupied and they worked very hard to eke out an existence and support their young families. They were devoted to their children's

education — the school was the first building in the community. The kids went whenever the part-time teacher was there and they were beginning to learn the language of their ancestors — a language their parents no longer spoke and their teacher was barely learning. They seemed happy in ways many of us do not experience. It was an example of the power of liberation theology — the community's belief in their own resources and capabilities and raw determination with deep commitment — that had created the community.

So I wonder — do we indeed sacrifice our sons and daughters? Or would we never do that? Think about it with me. Of course almost none of us intends to sacrifice a child. And yet are there not some ways in which that's exactly what we do?

What gods do we listen to — the gods of consumption, of warfare, of busy calendars, of addictions to the drugs that induce pleasure or numbness? And in what ways do we damage our children and our families by paying more attention to those gods than to the angel who demands that we not harm them? Which voice do we hear more clearly? Which do we heed?

Are we not asking our best young men and women to sacrifice their lives or their mental and physical wellness in wars? Have we done enough to prevent terrorism by becoming friends with the Islamic world and helping provide the resources that would support healthy communities in the Middle East? Yes, even one of our own members is working diligently on exactly that, but is it enough?

Do we support the men and women who have responded to the call to war? Or do we sacrifice them, casting them as unworthy of the best possible care when they return wounded?

How do we contribute to the sacrifice of the Earth in our quest for wealth and resources? How do our demands for en-

ergy impact our world? What about our giant carbon footprints that contaminate the atmosphere with carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases, knowing their threat to the climate? What about strip mining for coal or fracking for shale gas without enough attention to impacts? Why do we continue to subsidize the fossil fuels that we are running out of, but offer a mere pittance of support to renewable energy sources? Follow the money and you'll find the power that corrupts our energy policies.

Does the story offer a warning to us to pay more attention to what is really important than to the influences of a culture gone half mad with expectations, entitlements, and demands? How do we discern the real voices of health and wellness? Is it the voice that demands sacrifice or the one that stays our hand and offers a blessing? What are we really called to do and to be in order to be fully present to one another? To care for all children? For our communities? For the Earth?

Can we learn anything from the Abraham and Isaac story that will help us appreciate life, to recognize and be grateful for the beauty around us? To commit our lives to repairing the damages to relationships and to the earth and to celebrating wonder and awe in the face of the gifts of life?

Then perhaps the angel's blessing will come to pass — that "by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice."

Oh, may it be so. Amen.

Image: "The Sacrifice of Isaac" by Rembrandt, 1635, oil on canvass. Image in the public domain.