

SACRIFICE – AT WHAT COST?
(Genesis 22:1-14)

Now there's a story that deserves an R rating, at least. I'm surprised it gets included in children's Bibles, but I checked out a few last week, and there it was. How do you even begin to explain a story like this to an eight year old? What do you say to a child about a God who orders a parent to sacrifice a child?

That's not to say that this is an easy to explain it to an adult, either. Oh, we can go on about social conditions and cultural background and how the Canaanites practiced child sacrifice and how the Bible condemns it (which implies pretty strongly that the Israelites did it, too.) But no amount of explaining can possibly take away the sheer horror of the story. There's no way to sugarcoat what God demands or to explain away what Abraham is willing to do without even a peep of protest.

Come to think of it, it might actually be harder to explain this story to an adult, and especially a parent, than it is to a kid because an adult begins to understand the enormity of what Abraham does.

This is one of those stories that it would be nice to dismiss as a historical aberration that doesn't have anything to say to us. But then we have to wonder: why is this story in the Bible in the first place? As I said, the Old Testament relentlessly condemns child sacrifice. So why did the editors who put the Bible together make an exception and include this story. They must have thought it had something to say, that there was something we need to learn from it.

The author of the New Testament book of Hebrews held Abraham up as a paragon of faith precisely because he was willing to sacrifice Isaac. "By faith," Hebrews says, "Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac" (Heb. 11:17). Abraham is considered the "father of the faithful," which is a strange title for a would-be child killer.

One pastor was foolhardy enough to show an adult ed class a video that dramatized this story. When it ended, the class sat there in stunned silence. The pastor nervously tried to get some discussion going, without much luck, until he asked, "What does this old story mean to us? We're put off by the primitive notion that God wanted a father to sacrifice his child. Can this story have any significance today?"

At that point an older woman interrupted, "God still does, God still does."
"How so?" the pastor asked.

And she explained how her son had gone to college, earned a degree in engineering, and then got involved in a fundamentalist church. He married a young woman in that church and they had a baby. Now he was convinced that God wanted him to give up his job to be a missionary and go to Lebanon and take his family with him, including this woman's only grandchild.

Then another man spoke up and said, "I'll tell you what this story means to me. It means my family and I are looking for another church."

"Why?" the astonished pastor asked.

“Because when I look at that God, the God of Abraham, I feel I’m near a real God, not the sort of dignified, businesslike, Chamber of Commerce god we chatter about here on Sunday morning. Abraham’s God could blow a person to bits, give and then take a child, ask for everything from a person and then ask for more. That’s the kind of God I want to know.”

Is anyone here looking for that kind of demanding God? Or do we prefer a kinder, gentler, less threatening deity – a God who’s safe, protective, helpful, like a kindly grandfather who would never think of making any serious demands on us?

I’ve quoted her before, but it’s always worth hearing Annie Dillard’s take on God. She writes,

On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the slightest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are like children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return (*Teaching a Stone to Talk*, p. 40-41).

That’s the kind of God Abraham would have understood. That’s the kind of God Abraham knew firsthand. That’s the kind of God Abraham obeyed. Is that the kind of God we’re looking for? I nearly said “Is that the kind of God we’re comfortable with?” But that’s just the point: Abraham’s kind of God isn’t about making us comfortable.

The story of Abraham and Isaac might strike us as primitive, barbaric, downright sadistic. What kind of God demands child sacrifice? And what kind of parent obeys that kind of God?

But what about the gods we willingly and eagerly sacrifice our own children to? It scares me to think of the kind of world our grandchildren are going to inherit and it infuriates me to hear politicians mouthing pious platitudes about our responsibility to future generations while they ignore the massive debt we’ve run up and refuse to come up with an energy policy that makes environmental sense. “Kicking the can down the road,” as they say, simply means we’re more concerned about our own comfort and convenience than we are about generations to come. We’re doing well if we look even a year ahead.

There’s a widespread attitude that simply says “I’ll be gone anyway, so why should I care?” But Native Americans made important decisions by asking what the effect would be on the people and the land for the next seven generations. Do you think we might look at things differently if we took responsibility for our actions and asked “What will the choices we make today mean for our grandchildren and great grandchildren and great, great, great grandchildren?” Do you think we might make different decisions?

We often associate “sacrifice” with men and women in the military. So what about the 6,000 young Americans killed and the 44,000 wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan. Whose altar are they sacrificed on?

Leo Tolstoy saw a huge contradiction between the way of the cross and the ways of so-called Christian nations:

A Christian nation which engages in war ought, in order to be logical, not only take down the cross from its church steeples, turn the churches to some other use, give the clergy other duties, having first prohibited the preaching of the gospel, but also ought to abandon all the requirements of morality which flow from Christian law (Quoted in David Augsburger, *Dissident Discipleship*, p. 133-134).

We shouldn't look condescendingly on old Abraham while we blithely sacrifice our own children to puny gods of security, comfort, convenience, self-indulgence and the like. The biggest difference between Abraham and us is that he had the integrity to pick up the knife and do the awful deed himself.

I said a couple of weeks ago that my sermons this summer are going to look at some of the things I wish Jesus hadn't said. This story is in that same category – I wish it wasn't there, but it is – and it anticipates some of the things Jesus said that I wish he hadn't, things that make demands on us, things that make us uncomfortable, things that tell us there's a price to be paid if we're serious about being disciples.