

A Difficult and Dangerous Story

Genesis 22:1-19

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Growing up this is one of the stories we learned in children's Sunday school. Though growing up a Baptist I learned many of the biblical stories as a kid, the bible stories with children and animals were most oft included in the curriculum. And this story has both.

It was only as a young adult that I read a theologian who claimed that in the minds of children, this story can become abusive. She argued that the story says to a child that an authority figure can abuse them in the name of God. That they should be obedient to the parent or minister or elder who abuses them.

In horror, I recalled how I had been taught the story when I was a child. Isaac was portrayed as being obedient to his father and to God. Isaac was willing to be sacrificed.

It was then that I realized that not only is this a difficult story, filled with intellectual and existential puzzles, it is also dangerous story.

In April we hosted an ecumenical Good Friday service. One aspect of ecumenical services is hearing and experiencing things from different viewpoints and different traditions. Occasionally that means hearing something you object to. I had that experience on Good Friday.

One of the ministers, who is a friend of mine, referred to this story in one of his reflections, referring to how the story troubles people. He then said, "People forget, there was a ram." As if the existence of the ram should remove all the intellectual and existential difficulties. As if the story isn't a dangerous one because of the ram. I believe this interpretation is a short-cut that doesn't do justice to how we should struggle with the story.

A few days after this Good Friday service with the statement that had unsettled me still unsettling me every time I thought of it, Michael and I departed for Italy. I didn't keep thinking about Good Friday once we were there, but the line came back to me when we were in Florence visiting the Uffizi Gallery and I encountered Caravaggio's painting of the Sacrifice of Isaac. The painting has been one of my favourite images of this story for some time. When I preached on this text at Rolling Hills in Fayetteville nine years ago, I printed the Caravaggio on the cover of the bulletin. But familiarity did not prepare me for how it grabbed me. I stood in awe, rapture, and contemplation before the painting. I could barely pull myself away.

In the painting the ram is right there beside the boy, clearly visible, not hiding in the background or in a bramble. The angel, grabbing Abraham's arm, has a look of great alarm on his face and is earnestly pointing to the ram, as if saying, "Don't you see the ram?" It is as if Caravaggio himself wanted to disabuse would-be interpreters of the story of the short-cut "there was a ram."

In the painting, Abraham either is so blind in his obedience that he does not see the ram, or he is consciously ignoring the ram's presence. Isaac's face is wrenched in agony, not the complacent obedience in so many illustrations of this story. This Isaac is clearly an abused child.

When I did pull myself away from the painting, I had to sit for five minutes and collect myself.

This story prompts us to ask the terrifying question, "Could you offer your child as a sacrifice to God?" It is terrifying to consider how many people have answered this question in the affirmative. Who have, in one way or another, sacrificed their children because of their religious and political beliefs. For instance, the statue at Kent State which memorializes the massacre there is a representation of the sacrifice of Isaac.

How do we respond to someone who claims to have killed their child upon a word from God? We lock them up. In many states we sentence them to death.

And that gets us to the crux of this story. It is my firm conviction that when we approach this story from the Book of Genesis the first thing we must admit if the story is going to have any power for us is that the action of Abraham is horrible, terrifying, maybe even evil. Only when we admit that about this story can we get at its power.

Contrast Abraham in this story with Sethe in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*.

Beloved is a powerful story dealing with the effects of slavery upon former slaves. It handles the psychological and social trauma with images of the paranormal. The main character is a woman Sethe who has escaped from the South with her children. The most shocking scene of the book comes when the overseer from the plantation where she was once enslaved tracks her down. Sethe sees him coming up the road. She runs, snatching up her children, and gathers them in the woodshed. The book reads:

Inside, two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a . . . woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other. She did not look at them; she simply swung the baby toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time Right off it was clear, to [the overseer] especially, that there was nothing there to claim. . . . Two were lying open-eyed in sawdust; a third pumped blood down the dress of the main one . . . she'd gone wild

We are supposed to be horrified by this scene. It conveys the message that slavery was so terrifying that a person could be reduced to such extremities to avoid it. Sethe will kill her children before she will allow them to be enslaved.

As much as this story horrifies, it has an explanation. Our reason can grasp it. However, to rationally grasp the story of Abraham is much harder, maybe impossible. And what adds to the difficulty and the danger, is that within this story, within Genesis, and within the larger biblical tradition, Abraham is lauded as a hero of faith because he obeyed his God.

This terrifying action, which under most circumstances we would consider to be evil, was commanded by God. So, ultimately, it is God who we end up being shocked at in this story. We are horrified by the actions of God.

What do we do with this God? Central to my image of God is the claim of I John 4:8 that “God is love.” I relish those stories that show compassion, tenderness, and mercy.

But then there are those other stories. Elisha calls forth a bear to massacre a group of children because they made fun of his bald head. Joshua follows divine command in perpetuating genocide against the Canaanites. Jephthah does kill his daughter. All creation is destroyed in the Flood. There are many of these stories, which Phyllis Tribble described accurately as “texts of terror.”

Another easy out is simply to dismiss all of these texts, for one reason or another to ignore them and think that they have nothing to say to us.

As I have grown more mature in my faith I have come to reject such easy answers. Even the parts of scripture that I find difficult or dangerous, even those parts I object to, I have learned have something to teach me. I must take this whole sacred text and wrestle with it.

This is a powerful, awesome, dangerous book. It is dangerous because it is imbued with the transcendent and the sacred, and we humans have a poor record of dealing with the sacred. We are just as likely to use it to justify our wars, hatreds, and prejudices, as we are likely to create beauty, goodness, and truth.

This book is also dangerous because it holds the awesome power to transform life. In its pages a lost person can find herself.

The Binding of Isaac and difficult stories like it remind me that God is a mystery. Ultimately, I will never understand God. There are things in the divine nature that are incomprehensible to me. That is why our ancestors told stories like this. They experienced God as loving and compassionate, but at times their experience of God was mysterious and wild. We should be authentic to how our experiences are similar.

There is another thing which this story reminds me of. To get at that let me share with you the outcomes of this story for its four main characters – God, Abraham, Isaac, and Sarah.

In the Genesis text, God never speaks to Abraham again. They had communicated so closely and so often before, but not again.

In the monotheistic tradition Abraham becomes the Father of Faith. He spent much of his life seeking a son, yet somehow he manages to separate himself from every son he ever had. Notice that verse 19 tells us that Abraham returned to his servants and they traveled back home. It does not say that Isaac traveled back with them. It appears that Abraham’s son does not want to go home with his father.

What is the outcome for Isaac? Later in Genesis we see Isaac spend twenty years on his deathbed. His wife Rebekah runs his household. He seems incapable of dealing with his own sons Esau and Jacob. And, most tellingly, Isaac has his own name for God. This name appears later in the Book of Genesis and it startles us. When referring to the God of Isaac, God is known as the “Fear of Isaac.”

And what about Sarah? She dies in the very next chapter. Biblical commentators have suggested that her grief and anger were too much. This was the promised son for whom she waited and toiled, and he had almost been taken from her.

This is a story whose characters end up broken and damaged. Listen to these comments from Karen Armstrong:

[The Binding of Isaac] reminds us that living in God’s presence requires an arduous

struggle that can bring us to the brink of despair. The search for blessing, the essence of life itself, involved an encounter with death and the death of meaning. The reality called "God" could manifest itself as a friendly, benevolent presence but also as terrifying and cruel. In our desperate world, where we all struggle for physical or psychological survival, our glimpses of the divine can only be fragmentary, imperfect, and colored by our experience of life's inherent tragedy. . . . Preachers sometimes give the impression that religion will inevitably bring sweetness and light into our lives. We will feel God's love and become whole and fulfilled. Our faith will give us a consciousness of God's presence that will make us serene and joyful. But Genesis indicates that this is by no means always the case.