

“Do You Hear What I Hear?”

We have been following the saga of Abraham and Sarah over the last month. It has been quite an adventure for them and for us. With today’s reading we do not come to the end of the saga but we come to the end of the episode about the Promise. Like the portion we heard last week it is a horrifying story. If you remember last week we heard about how Sarah told Abraham to send Hagar and her son Ishmael out into the wilderness. It was something that Abraham was reluctant to do because Ishmael was his first-born son. Of course, that was the reason that Sarah wanted him sent away for fear that his priority in birth would diminish her son’s inheritance and blessings. God assured Abraham that Hagar and Ishmael would be safe and that Ishmael would also become a leader of a great nation. So Abraham sent them on their way as Sarah had demanded.

With one son gone Abraham still has Isaac and God’s promise that Abraham would be the father of as many as the stars in the sky, but then God gives him the instruction that we just heard. He was to take Isaac to an undisclosed mountain and sacrifice him to God. It is a terrifying request and one that Abraham does not seem to question. Indeed, he sets about getting ready to do as commanded by God.

What we have here is what scholars call an *inclusio*. The portion of the story from chapter 12 and is reflected in chapter 22. These parallels signal that the saga of the Promise is ending. Looking back to Genesis chapter 12 we read the words that God uses to call Abraham out of Haran. If we compare them to the commandment to sacrifice Isaac we notice the equivalents:

- God calls Abraham to “Go forth... to the land that I will show you”¹ and today’s reading God says, “Go forth...to that land of Moriah...on one of the heights that I will point out to you.”² Note that in both instances the final destination is withheld. We can also note that the Hebrew words translated as “Go forth” (*Lekh lekha*) are included in each command.
- Another parallel occurs between “your land, your homeland, your father’s house”³ and “your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love.”⁴ The first call to Abraham is echoed in this call to sacrifice his son.

The astounding difference is that the first call is with the promise that Abraham will be “a great nation, make your name great, and you shall be a blessing.” In this second scenario all of the promises will come to an end. After all who would bless a man who killed his son? How would a man found a great nation when he has no progeny? As horrifying as the request is, Abraham has trusted God throughout this long and arduous journey. He intends to maintain his trust in God.

I believe this trust is so complete that he truly believes that despite the severity of the request that God will not make him go through with it. Abraham may not know what is planned, but it seems to me that he suspects something. First when they get near Mt. Moriah Abraham tells his servants to wait there while he and Isaac go worship “and **we** will return to you.” He assures them that both of them will return. We could chalk this up to subterfuge, but we know that Abraham has been lousy at deception in the past; remember when he tried to pass off Sarah as his sister, twice.

¹ Genesis 12:1

² Genesis 22:2

³ Genesis 12:1

⁴ Genesis 22:2

Secondly, as Abraham and Isaac ascend the mountain Isaac asks where the sacrificial lamb is. Abraham responds “God will see to the sheep for his burnt offering, son.” He could have responded that God would see to the offering, leaving the identity of that which is to be sacrificed nebulous, but he did not. If this were another Genesis character, and I am thinking of Jacob, I would say that he could be playing a trick. Jacob was a trickster. Abraham is not. I believe that Abraham’s trust in God is so complete that he does not for a minute think that God will require him to kill his beloved son any more than God would allow Ishmael to perish in the wilderness.

This passage begins with the narrator saying that God put Abraham to the test, but God has been testing Abraham from the get go. Whether it was the command to go forth from Haran to an unknown land, the promise of a child to aged parents, the promise of numerous progeny to a childless couple, and the promise of blessings from many people. Each command and each promise has been a test of Abraham’s faith in YHWH. Abraham has continued on the journey each time. The difference this time is that Abraham has literal skin in the game; his own flesh and blood. But will this test will turn out well.

Of course, it seemingly does but the cost was great. Perhaps, the test was to see if Abraham could stand up to God’s whimsical command. Perhaps the test was to see if Abraham would be willing to bargain with God as he had when God set out to judge Sodom and Gomorrah. Perhaps the test was to see if Abraham would offer himself instead of Isaac. There are many ways in which Abraham could have responded and did not. He chose the most tragic way and while his faith was commended it is at the expense of Sarah and Isaac’s faith. The both disappear from the story. In fact, Abraham returns to his servants without Isaac not as he had previously promised.

Readers often ask the question, “How could God ask such a horrible thing of Abraham?” I think another question might be, “Why did Abraham accept this request at face value?” Abraham’s experience of God all along has been one of guidance, protection, care, generosity, and *hesed* (lovingkindness). God has challenged Abraham at times but Abraham has also challenged God. He laughs when God promises him descendants as numerous as the stars in heaven. When God goes to judge Sodom and Gomorrah Abraham argues him down from finding a hundred righteous men to looking for only ten. What keeps Abraham from challenging God’s commandment to sacrifice the son of the promise when he has been willing to do so on other occasions?

While Abraham is rewarded with God reaffirming the promise of many descendants, blessings and even adding “your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes” we are still troubled. I feel that this passage cries out for something more. It reminds me that when we discern God’s call we always do so in community. If Abraham had called together others to discern he would have been reminded that God is a God of love. God is not a God of sacrifice as we are told in the Psalms.⁵ Let us not make the mistake that Abraham made and too many others have made over the millennia thinking that God speaks to us alone. That is arrogant, egotistical, and usually, if not always, wrong. When we discern in loving community we are able to hear God’s true voice. We may just find that what we thought was God’s voice is something other and something other than what God wants for us and for the world.

⁵ For example, see Psalms 40, 49, 51