

July 2, 2017 "Patriotism"

(13th Sunday in Ordinary Time)
(Communion)(4th of July Weekend)

Genesis 22:1-14; Matthew 10:40-42

How does God measure our patriotism with the Kingdom of God?

We should probably begin with the basics: what does it mean to be patriotic?

(from the Dictionary) having or expressing devotion to and vigorous support for one's country

But that doesn't really say it, does it? The word takes on so much that we use it to challenge, test and measure; we would do well to consider the broader scope of it's use: loyalty, sacrifice, honor, "putting country first."

But the word we know comes from the Greek meaning "relating to a fellow countryman." In my mind, that brings us back to Scripture and the overwhelming evidence that God measures our patriotism with the Kingdom, with God, by how we relate to our fellow humanity: not just toward Christians, but to humanity. Are we certain we are GOD's patriots?



Genesis 22:1-14

22:1 After these events, God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!"

Abraham answered, "I'm here."

2 God said, "Take your son, your only son whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah. Offer him up as an entirely burned offering there on one of the mountains that I will show you." **3** Abraham got up early in the morning, harnessed his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, together with his son Isaac. He split the wood for the entirely burned offering, set out, and went to the place God had described to him.

4 On the third day, Abraham looked up and saw the place at a distance. **5** Abraham said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will walk up there, worship, and then come back to you."

6 Abraham took the wood for the entirely burned offering and laid it on his son Isaac. He took the fire and the knife in his hand, and the two of them walked on together. **7** Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father?"

Abraham said, "I'm here, my son."

Isaac said, "Here is the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the entirely burned offering?"

8 Abraham said, "The lamb for the entirely burned offering? God will see to it,^[a] my son." The two of them walked on together.

9 They arrived at the place God had described to him. Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He tied up his son Isaac and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. **10** Then Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to kill his son as a sacrifice. **11** But the Lord's messenger called out to Abraham from heaven, "Abraham? Abraham?"

Abraham said, "I'm here."

12 The messenger said, "Don't stretch out your hand against the young man, and don't do anything to him. I now know that you revere God and didn't hold back your son, your only son, from me." **13** Abraham looked up and saw a single ram^[b] caught by its horns in the dense underbrush. Abraham



went over, took the ram, and offered it as an entirely burned offering instead of his son. ¹⁴ Abraham named that place “the Lord sees.”^[c] That is the reason people today say, “On this mountain the Lord is seen.”^[d]

Footnotes:

Genesis 22:8 Or “God will see”;

or “God will provide”

Genesis 22:13 LXX, Sam, Syr, Tg;

MT “a ram behind”

Genesis 22:14 Or “the Lord is seen”; or “the Lord provides”

Genesis 22:14 Or “the Lord sees”; or “on the Lord’s mountain, it will be provided”

- What does this test represent to you? Ultimately, it was a test meant for Abraham. What would a test like this look like for you?
- How do you think Abraham knew God wanted him to do this?

- Why do you think Abraham lied to his servants (v.5)?
- What do you imagine was going through Isaac’s mind when this was happening (v.9)?
- What do you make of v.12? Was there really a time when God DIDN’T know what Abraham would do?
- What do think Isaac and Abraham’s relationship was like after this?

Matthew 10:40-42

⁴⁰ “Those who receive you are also receiving me, and those who receive me are receiving the one who sent me. ⁴¹ Those who receive a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward. Those who receive a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person’s reward. ⁴² I assure you that everybody who gives even a cup of cold water to these little ones because they are my disciples will certainly be rewarded.”

- To what reward is Jesus referring? And what does it mean to receive a prophet, a righteous person, or Christ?
- How does v.42 help clarify the rest (if it does)?

Reflection on Genesis story by the Taizé Community

http://www.taize.fr/en_article167.html?date=2011-03-01

Does God ask for human sacrifice? Why is such an archaic-seeming text found in the Bible? Testing someone, in the Bible, means knowing them, discovering their true identity (see Deuteronomy 8:2). What then is the test with which Abraham is faced? God says literally: "Go, take your son, and bring him up for a burnt offering." Does God mean: offer your only son in sacrifice (as Abraham understands at first)? Or rather: Go up together, you and your son, to offer a sacrifice (this may be Abraham's secret hope, because he told the other servants "we will come back to you")?

If we understand "to bring up" in the most obvious sense, that is, to offer a sacrifice, then the test involves much more than Isaac's life alone. Does Abraham have to give up God's promise, related to the miracle of the birth of his son in his old age, a miracle which had been announced by the three angels in Genesis 18? God seems to want to destroy what he has slowly built up. Receiving a gift and being put to the test are often associated in the Bible. Any gift is in itself a test: will the person who receives it cling to the gift in itself or

look beyond it to discover the person offering it?

Abraham passes the test. God told him: "You have not withheld from me..."; in other words, you did not cling jealously to the gift. Thus God sees in truth the faith of Abraham, who continued to search for the will of his God in the midst of a dark night. "God sees" is the etymology of the name of the mountain on which the father and son are standing: "Moriah". But the narrator immediately adds: "The Lord is seen" (v. 14). In this symbolic place, the encounter between Abraham and God becomes mutual recognition.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?



"God proved Abraham, not to draw him to sin, as Satan tempts."

—Matthew Henry

Yet, instead of the son, represented by the “lamb” in the question of Isaac (v. 7), it is the “ram,” a father-figure, which is sacrificed. Although he did not sacrifice his son, Abraham sacrificed his fatherhood, in the sense of possessing the son of the Promise. Abraham no longer possesses his son (the name of Isaac is no longer mentioned), but he saw God and was seen by God in truth. What he finds now is the promise of God, made possible once again: “Through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed.”



Commentary & Interpretive Historical Analysis on Genesis story by Kathryn M. Schifferdecker

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2138

There is a Yiddish folk tale that goes something like this: Why did God not send an angel to tell Abraham to sacrifice Isaac?

Because God knew that no angel would take on such a task. Instead, the angels said, “If you want to command death, do it yourself.”

The story named by Christians “the sacrifice of Isaac” and by Jews “the *akedah*” (the “binding” of Isaac) has engendered heated debate over the centuries. Is it a story of an abusive God, a misguided Abraham, religious violence at its worst? Or is it a story of faith and obedience?

Trying to get around the difficulties, many argue that it is simply an etiological tale about the shift from human sacrifice to animal sacrifice. This seems likely. It is certainly the case that other biblical texts expressly forbid child sacrifice (e.g. Leviticus 18:21; Jeremiah 7:30-34; Ezekiel 20:31). The practice is known in the cultures surrounding Israel and may have been practiced in Israel as well (hence the prophetic condemnation of it).

There is more here, though, than such a history-of-religions interpretation allows. The *akedah* is a foundational story for Judaism and Christianity in ways that are too complex to trace in this short essay.¹ Even before the canon was closed, the *akedah* became associated with worship at the Jerusalem Temple. In 2 Chronicles 3:1, the mountain of the Temple is called “Mount Moriah,” the mountain of the *akedah*. (In fact, “Moriah” appears in the Bible only in

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

“My neighbor, in all her neediness, is Christ for me.”

–Debra Dean Murphy

“When we give our lives away for some purpose beyond ourselves, that paradoxically results in a gain. As Christians we would call that the reward of the righteous.”

–Alyce M. McKenzie

“Life can only be understood backwards. But it must be lived forwards. And that's where the heart finds its pure hour, and its holy day.”

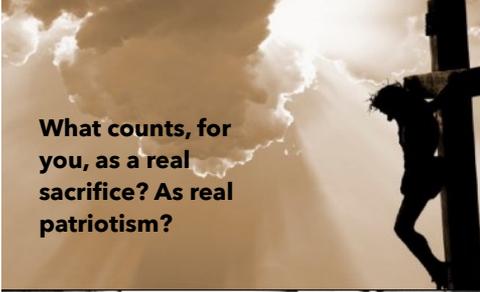
–Søren Kierkegaard

these two passages.) Hence, the sacrifice of the ram in place of Isaac becomes the foundational act for all the Temple sacrifices that follow.

For Christianity, the sacrifice of the beloved son has obvious resonance with Jesus' death. That's why Genesis 22 is appointed as one of the readings for the Easter Vigil (and sometimes as one of the readings on Good Friday). In addition, the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his son became for early Christians one of the greatest examples of his faith: “By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac ... He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead” (Hebrews 11:17, 19). In the history of Christian interpretation, Genesis 22 has continued to be understood as a story of faith against all odds, and as a foreshadowing of God's self-giving in Jesus Christ.

Despite this rich history of interpretation, well-meaning people through the centuries, horrified by this story, have attempted to negate it in various ways. And it is true that it can be a dangerous text, especially in an era of religious extremism. Anyone who preaches this story must emphatically say that God does not demand child sacrifice; indeed, that God abhors it (as evidenced by the prophets).

Still, there is a theological depth in this story that should not be passed



over. The narrative has gripped the religious imagination of Jew and Christian alike for thousands of years.
² It is worth looking at its details.

The story begins, "After these things God tested Abraham" (22:1). And what do "these things" include? God's call to Abraham to go to a land he has never seen; God's promise to Abraham that he will be the father of

a great nation; the long years of Sarah's barrenness; the birth of Ishmael; and at long last, the impossible birth of the boy they call "Laughter."

Then Abraham, at Sarah's insistence, casts out his first son, Ishmael, with great sorrow (see last week's commentary). And now, God demands a most horrible thing: "Take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go³ to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I will show you" (22:2). The rabbis imagine the scene:

God said, "Take your son." And Abraham said, "I have two sons." He answered him, "Your only son." He said to him, "Each is the only son of his mother." God said, "The one whom you love." Abraham replied, "Is there any limit to a father's love?" God answered, "Isaac."

The Hebrew prose of this story is beautiful and succinct. Abraham does what God demands, and sets out with his son. Abraham doesn't say much. Isaac says even less, and one is left to imagine what they are thinking and feeling. The narrator uses repetition to heighten the poignancy: "The two of them walked



on together," as the father and son walk together in silence on the third day (22:6). Together in purpose, together in love. The narrator continually emphasizes the relationship between the two, as if we need to be reminded: "Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac." "Isaac said to Abraham his father, "My father!" and he said, "Here I am, my son" (22:7).

"Here I am" -- in Hebrew *hineni*. It's the same word Abraham used to answer God's call in verse 1: "Here I am." Abraham is attentive to God, and equally attentive to his beloved son. Here I am.

And Isaac says, "See, we have fire, and wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" And Abraham, heart torn in two, says, "God will see to the lamb for the burnt offering, my

son." And, again, "The two of them walked on together" (22:7-8). Whether Isaac knew what was going to happen is a matter that the rabbis debated. Perhaps he did not, which makes Abraham's pain all that much more acute. Perhaps he did, which makes Isaac, too, an example of great faith and obedience. The two of them walk on together, father and son, the son carrying the wood for his own sacrifice. The first century rabbis, with no connection to Christianity but

with ample experience of Roman executions, said of this detail: "Isaac carries the wood for the sacrifice like one who carries his own cross."

They reach the place of sacrifice, and Abraham builds an altar.

Again, as if we need to be reminded, the narrator emphasizes the relationship between father and son. "He bound his son Isaac ... Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son" (22:9-10).

At that moment, the LORD calls to him with great urgency, "Abraham, Abraham!" And Abraham replies for the third and final time in the

story, *hineni*, "Here I am." One can imagine that his tone now is one of unspeakable relief and hope.

The LORD speaks, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me" (22:12).

"Now I know." This story does not subscribe to later notions of God's perfect omniscience. This is a

genuine test, and Abraham is free to decide what he will do. God neither knows nor pre-ordains how Abraham will respond. Reading this story with a hermeneutic



of generosity, one could argue that God imposes this one-time test on Abraham because God has risked everything on this one man, and God needs to know if he is faithful.⁴

Abraham and his descendants are the means by which God has chosen to bless the whole world (Genesis 12:3). And Abraham has not always proven up to the task (the wife-sister charade, Hagar and Ishmael). Now God needs to know whether

Abraham is willing to give up the thing most precious to him in all the world for the sake of being faithful to the God who gave him that gift in the first place. And Abraham passes this most excruciating of tests: "Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."

Then, as Abraham had told Isaac, God provides; God provides a ram to take the place of the beloved son. "So Abraham called that place 'The LORD will provide'; as it is said to this day, 'On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided'" (22:14).

There is a word-play here and in verse 8 that is worth noting. The Hebrew word (*ra'ah*) translated "provide" is literally the word for "seeing." So the last phrase can be translated, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided" or "On the mount of the LORD he shall be seen." Given the association of Mt. Moriah with the Temple Mount, both translations speak truth about God's presence and God's providence.

Well, much more could be said, of course. This is a very difficult story; there's no getting around it, and I'm sure that my reading of it won't be satisfactory to everyone who comes to this site. Still, I hope it's clear that when one is willing to plumb the depths of this story and to read it with care and with generosity, there are theological riches here.

The story of the *akedah* makes a claim on us: All that we have, even our own lives and those of the ones most dear to us, belong ultimately to God, who gave them to us in the first place. The story of the *akedah* assures us that God will provide, that God will be present. And, of course, as generations of Christian interpreters have seen, it foreshadows the story that forms the foundation of Christian faith - the story of the death and resurrection of the beloved son,⁵ son of Abraham, son of David, Son of God. For all these reasons and more, this is a story worth preaching.

Notes:

¹ For an insightful discussion of the *akedah* and its resonance in Jewish and Christian tradition, see Jon Levenson's *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* (Yale University Press, 1993).

² The *akedah* is a motif in many modern Israeli poems. See, for instance, the poems at <http://ktiva.blogspot.com/2006/11/poetry-of-akedah.html> (accessed 5/4/14).

³ The Hebrew phrase *lek-lekah* (get yourself going) occurs only here and in Gen 12:1, linking the two stories and marking this one as being as momentous as the initial call to Abraham.

⁴ This is the argument of Ellen Davis in her book *Getting Involved With*

God: Rediscovering the Old Testament (Cowley, 2001) 50-64.

5 To use the title of Jon Levenson's book (above).

Additional Thoughts

• "This poetical venture is entirely correct and perhaps can, among other things, serve to shed light on a fraud or a misunderstanding that has appeared repeatedly in all Christendom. A person makes Christian humility and self-denial empty when he indeed denies himself in one respect but does not have the courage to do it decisively, and therefore he takes care to be understood in his humility and self-denial – which certainly is not self-denial. Therefore, in order to be able to praise love, self-denial is required inwardly and self-sacrificing outwardly." –Søren Kierkegaard, 1847, *Works of Love*, Hong 1995 p. 374

• Each of the pictures on p.7 represent a facet of our society or history in which sacrifices are made: (in order from the top left) Civil Rights Movement, Firefighter (and other first responders), our economy, suffrage, Jesus Christ, our military, medical breakthroughs,

and our practice of religion. There are, of course, more. But what sacrifices do you think have contributed the most to our common well-being? What do you contribute to our common well-being?

- Would you say that God can count on your loyalty at all times?
- Would you say God could count on your making the Kingdom a priority every time?
- Our citizenship, our nation, has been hard fought but nevertheless a gift from God (we didn't choose where we'd be born). What will you do this week to demonstrate your gratitude for living in the United States of America?