

This story about God and Abraham is part of a larger story being told in the book of Genesis. The larger story is the origin story of our faith – the story that establishes who God is and our relationship to God. The underlying and overarching point of all of the stories within Genesis is to set the foundational understanding of God and God’s people.

The story begins with God creating all that is, and, all of it is good. God provides everything we could ever need. Like a farmer with a bag of seed, God scoops up handful after handful of blessings and scatters them across the soil of God’s creation, blessing all of humanity. Who is God? God is creator. God is provider. And, what God creates and provides is entirely a blessing of goodness.

And yet, from the very beginning of their story, people disobey whatever thing God asks of them until the whole of creation is full of corruption. God then takes drastic measures to course-correct the trajectory of badness created by their disobedience. God sends a massive flood to destroy this failed experiment. Another troubling text, friends, as we see this God is capable of drastic and terrible things. With flood waters God wipes the slate clean, washing away God’s first attempt at blessing all people through relationship with God, and committing to try again to bless the world – but differently.

At this point in the story, God’s strategy of blessing becomes much more focused. God chooses one person through whom God will bless everyone. I love the way Ellen Davis puts it. She says, “Abraham is like a prism; he focuses God’s blessing and then spreads it through the world like a rainbow stream of light.”

I must admit, I would much rather stay here, talking about God’s goodness and blessing rather than think about God’s troubling tendencies as displayed by the flood and by Abraham’s test.

So the story goes that after the flood, God chooses Abraham as the prism God will spread God’s blessing of all the world through. You might think God would choose an especially worthy, qualified, or deserving person to fill that position. Nope. No resumes are collected. No references are contacted. No reality-show competition is held. No ballots are cast. There is nothing special, or deserving, or noteworthy about this chosen person. He was just an ordinary guy, full of faith and of faults.

If you were raised going to church, or synagogue, then you know how central Abraham’s name and his story is to our faith. God makes promises to Abraham. God promises land and promises a multitude of descendants, promises blessing for himself and his children, and promises to bless all the world through him. You’ve heard the story of how God told him to leave his home and to go on a journey to an undisclosed location. And Abraham packs up his household and sets off on the journey – a model of faithfulness. But along the way, from time to time, doubt bubbles up for this childless man. He wants to believe in God’s promise, but,

can't fathom how God can actually accomplish it. God tries to reassure Abraham – God takes out to look up at the night sky full of stars and says, “Your family will be as numerous as the stars.” This is a God who makes promises and who provides a way to fulfill those promises, even when it seems impossible.

Even with God's reassurances, Abraham still doubts – and maybe he is a smidge impatient – and maybe he does have some issues with trust and he definitely has some issues with trustworthiness. Remember how, along the way, he is afraid that someone will hurt or kill him in order to take his beautiful wife, Sarah? So, he passes her off as his sister. This scheme leads to her being taken into a royal harem, not once but twice! Scared for himself, he puts her in a terrible situation.

Together, they concoct a scheme to have Abraham impregnate their slave, Hagar, putting her in a terrible situation and attempting to fulfill God's promise by their own hands. Hagar and Abraham do conceive a child and he is named Ishmael. And at long last, Sarah and Abraham also conceive a child named Isaac. With Isaac's birth, Ishmael is no longer seen as a solution but rather as a problem. Sarah wants him out of the picture and tells Abraham to cast he and his mother out into the desert to fend for themselves. Abraham doesn't want to do it, until, he hears a message from God telling him to do what Sarah has asked and that God will bless Ishmael too.

As Hagar and Ishmael journey in the desert, their food and their water runs out. They are sunburnt, dehydrated, and starving, vulnerable, and exposed, and are on the brink of death when God intervenes and provides sustenance for them to keep going. God rescues and saves. God provides and blesses. While back home Sarah and Abraham carry on with their lives as if Ishmael had never been born. He is lost to his father.

Who is God? God is a rescuer and a provider. God takes care of them: God takes care of us.

When the scripture passage for today begins with the words, “After these things,” all of this is what it is referring to. After Abraham's faithfulness and his faltering – after their scheming and collateral damage – after the doubt and impatience – after a path for the promise's fulfillment becomes a living reality – after the joy of children born and the sorrow of a child lost – after all of this. After God's creation and blessing – after God's promises and reassurances – after God's destruction and God's pivot to plan B – after God's rescuing and providing – after all of this...God has a test in store for Abraham.

You see, God has staked everything on Abraham, and, God is not confident in him. After these things, will Abraham stake everything on God?

Given all of this, God's test may be a little more understandable. Practically speaking, God has to know if this second attempt at blessing is as doomed as

God's first attempt. Was God already thinking up a third plan? Strategizing what to do if Abraham failed the test? God was determined to bless creation and to be in relationship with God's people. I imagine God had a contingency plan already in mind.

Nonetheless, the idea that God would test Abraham by requiring him to sacrifice his son is terrible. And Abraham's obedience is no less terrible. I wish there was a way to explain away the troubling nature of this story. There isn't. I can't fathom how God the creator, provider, giver of blessings – the God of goodness – does something so terrible. I can't fathom how Abraham is unquestionably willing to go along with murdering his son. There isn't any good news in this story.

Except for one tiny nugget of goodness. God intervenes, stops Abraham's knife, and provides an animal to sacrifice.

It is a million miles from our reality, but, human sacrifice was an acceptable ancient faith practice. We can't fathom that either, but, it was. And most often, the human's sacrificed were the youngest. By offering up the strong and the innocent, the hope was there would be rain to water the fields; that the hunt would be successful; that there would be victory over enemies; that the women would have male babies and your flocks would grow large – that is what ancient religions believed. An acceptable practice of the times and one that even the people of God flirted with.

So while the demand of this test seems outrageous to our ears, it would have sounded fairly predictable to Abraham. It would have been chalked up to God behaving like any other God. And Abraham would have been going along with the religious customs. Same old same old as all the other gods and all the other followers.

Except that is not what God wants nor demands – not human sacrifice – not the same old same old. God says, an emphatic and dramatic “No!” Who is this God? This God is different. This God requires something different from us than the same old same old. Now I wish there was a verse here at the end of this story that said directly, “God does not want nor need our human sacrifices in order to bless God's people.” It may not be there in the black and white text in our bibles, but that doesn't make it untrue.

Human sacrifice may have been an acceptable religious practice but it isn't what God wants nor needs. Well-meaning faithful people willingly sacrificed others in the name of religion. I am hard-pressed to think of something more terrible and terrifying. Like I said before, I would rather not think about this biblical story and its' implications. But I think we must. We must take a good hard look at where our faith tradition has gotten it wrong – where they have sacrificed life thinking they were being faithful – where their actions betray the way of love

shown to us through the life of Jesus – where they dealt in death instead of life and life abundant. And then, we must be brave and honest with ourselves as we examine our contemporary experience – Where are we sacrificing life thinking we are being faithful? What of our actions betrays the way of love show us through the life of Jesus? Where are we dealing in death instead of life and life abundant? Where are we getting it wrong? How is God calling us today to stop our corrupt faith practices? Where are we just doing the same old same old when God requires something different?

Stories like the near sacrifice of Abraham’s son *should* haunt us. It is a cautionary tale of our own propensity to get it wrong. It is a reminder that our God is unlike any other and what is acceptable for other gods is unacceptable to this God. Faithfully following this different God means we will continually be living in a way that counters what seems normal and acceptable in our world. This God is going to keep us on our toes and demand more from us. Which means we must be brave enough for the kind of honest self-evaluation this story, this God, invites us into.

When God saved Isaac from the blade of Abraham’s knife, God may just have saved us from ourselves.

May we be willing to linger in the discomfort of this story and the questions it raises. May we be willing to confront the trauma inflicted by our faith ancestors and to question our own participation in such things. And in so doing, may we find the new and better way God provides for us. May it be so, amen.

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