

HERE I AM: LIFE FOR LIFE

Based on Genesis 22:1-8 and Mark 8: 35-37

Rody usually compliments my choices for the bulletin cover. But this past Friday, instead of her usual "Oh, that's lovely," she said, "That's a pretty grim cover you have there." My only defense was to say, "Well, it's a pretty grim story."

Like most great biblical stories, the story of the sacrifice or binding of Isaac has many meanings. It has most commonly been read as a lesson in obedience, in passing the tests that God puts in our path. No doubt some of those meanings are here—Abraham obeys without question, and is rewarded many times over. But that's a dangerous path. Obedience to God's will is entirely good. But discerning God's will is not always easy. When people are profoundly stressed—by circumstance, by brain chemistry—they may hear God saying all kinds of terrible things. And we have seen in the course of the 20th century that obedience can be a form that evil takes in our world, something demanded by evil purposes—racism and genocide and torture—and an excuse that we human beings use for doing the easy thing instead of the right thing. It is known now as the Nuremberg defense—"I was simply following orders."

So Abraham's unquestioning obedience disturbs us. He too is only following orders. After WWI and during the Vietnam War, young men felt that their fathers, their elders had betrayed them, had offered up the young men's lives to the cause of the war—and in both cases the poets of the younger generation remembered Isaac's story. Wilfred Owen, a bitter veteran of WWI, tells a story in which Abraham refuses to listen to the angel of God who tells him to stop, and goes on to slaughter not only his own son but "half the seed of Europe, one by one." The sacrifice that God seemed to demand had, in Owen's time, slipped into a chaos of senseless and unholy killing.

Sometimes preachers read this story as signifying the end of child sacrifice, or as underlining the idea that God does not require child sacrifice. But the story seems an odd way to put child sacrifice at a distance. Abraham is rewarded for being willing to sacrifice his son, for being poised on the brink of that sacrifice. He is not required to go through with it, true—but that's kind of a mixed message about whether God ever would require such a sacrifice. Historians tell us, in fact, that the Israelites, at one long-ago time, on the far border of biblical history, most likely thought of human sacrifice as the ultimate sacrifice. In particular, in this society where fathers and sons were the backbone of the people's existence, for a father to sacrifice his son was the ultimate sacrifice—rarely required in fact, but always there as an ideal or an extreme.

Abraham is ready to sacrifice not only his beloved son, but his own link to future generations, the very meaning of his life. The Hebrew people had no belief in an afterlife. Each individual's life took on meaning not through the promise of eternal reward or

punishment. Each individual's life took on meaning through the individual's connection and contribution to the whole, to the people. For a man, his son replaced him, took up his life where he left it off, continued the unbroken chain of which he himself also formed a key link. For Abraham to cut short Isaac's life is to cut short his own life, to cut himself out of the ongoing story God is telling.

Still, it's Isaac who faces the knife, raised above his bound body.

We need to be sure we are not sugarcoating this story. True, Isaac does not die. But his life is nevertheless offered up to God; he knows for a moment that he will die, as does Abraham. Coming to the brink of killing someone without killing them is a form of torture. Many militaries have used it—lined prisoners up, put a gun to their heads and pulled the trigger, when there is in fact no bullet in the gun. The certainty that one is about to die, even when the death doesn't happen, is so traumatic that these acts of torture—physically harmless—can cause deep and longlasting psychological damage. Presumably God is not doing this to torture Isaac. It may be that the sense that his life is to be offered up to God takes some of the torment out of the act—it is not murder, in Isaac's case, but a sacrifice. It is not another human being wielding ultimate control over Isaac's life, but his creator. We hope for his sake that that makes a difference.

We sometimes call this story the sacrifice of Isaac, but of course the sacrifice doesn't happen, so we sometimes don't know quite what to call the story. In Jewish tradition the story is called the binding of Isaac. Because the binding is one detail that particularly troubles the reader. Why must Isaac be tied up? Is he fighting his father? Is he fighting for his life? In rabbinic retellings of this story, the midrash, Isaac on the contrary agrees to be sacrificed, he too has complete faith in God. But in the midrash, Isaac asks Abraham to tie him up, because Isaac is afraid he will from instinct kick or push away the knife at the last minute. Then again, in another rabbinic retelling—my favorite—Isaac asks Abraham, "Does my mother know you're doing this?"

Sarah is absent from this story, because it's a story about fathers and sons—their connection, their rivalry. Abraham is ready to take the boy's life, and thus to cut short his own life. God seems ready to accept that sacrifice; God seems in fact to demand that sacrifice. And in a sense, God does take the boy's life. But then God gives it back. Gives it back to Abraham—yes, you can have a living son to carry on your name, your life. And gives it back to Isaac. Yes, you can have a life, a wife, children of your own.

From this moment on, it must be clear to Abraham and to Isaac that their lives are a gift from God—a debt they have always owed to God, that God has chosen to forgive.

And it's also clear that things change. One minute Isaac's death is imminent, the next he is not to be harmed. We focus on Abraham, Isaac, and the demanding voice of God in this story, but we need to also hear the angel of God, telling Abraham, "don't do it." Things change. Once God seemed to want the sacrifice of animals on a regular basis and now, not so much. Once God seemed to insist that married people stay married, even if one was beating the other on a regular basis, even if the violence in the home was crippling the

children. And now? No, the angel tells us—don't make that sacrifice. God wants your life, not your death.

One meaning of the story for us may be that there are times when we need to speak for the angel of God—to stop the unwanted sacrifice, to intervene when someone is mistakenly hurting themselves or another in the name of a sacrifice to God, to stay the hand that holds the mutilating knife.

And maybe this story is less about obedience and more about the fact that life and death are always in God's hands. That too is a dangerous path! Surely every death, every life cut short by human sin, by murder and neglect and starvation cannot be evidence of God's will. But in the story of the binding of Isaac, it becomes clear that every life, every minute of every life is a gift from God, a bonus, an over the top, undeserved windfall.

Both in the blood and guts of the ancient world and in the more abstract sense we use today, sacrifice is ironic. We give up what we most want to keep, and we give it up in order to keep it. In order to hold it close and care for it, we have to offer it up. The story of the binding of Isaac for us in the Christian community needs to be read in the light of Jesus' teaching, that those who want to save their lives will lose them, and those who give up their lives will save them. The insistence that my life, my strength, my money, my children, my home belong to me and I must hold them as tightly as I can—it's a losing proposition. Time and life and God work like erosion on our possessions, which were never really ours, and the tighter we grasp, the more our life becomes a process of loss. It's only when we give it up, acknowledge God's ultimate ownership of all of it, that life becomes full of amazing gifts and unexpected gains.

It's not easy, maybe only slightly easier than it was for Abraham to offer God his beloved son. When we are gainfully employed, for example, that employment seems natural, deserved, part of us. If suddenly the company downsizes and we are out of that same job, it can feel like we are being asked to sacrifice a leg. Coming to terms with that kind of unwanted change is about giving up some control, adjusting to what life has handed us, trusting that though our lives are out of our own control, they are still in God's caring hands.

This sermon is the beginning of a series—continued the week after next—on the Old Testament stories that feature the phrase “here I am.” I find there is so much to say about the story itself that I have left myself little room to even mention the occurrences of “Here I am” in this story. But let me just say that when God first calls to Abraham, Abraham's willing and ready answer is this, “here I am.” Yours to use, yours to command, at your service—here I am, for you. Then, sadly, as Isaac walks along beside his father up the mountain, Isaac calls to him, “Father,” and Abraham again answers, “here I am.” Abraham is caught between his desire to be present to God and his need to be present to his son, and ultimately the one must supercede the other.

The story of the binding of Isaac is troubling, but so is Jesus' teaching about losing our lives in order to save them. We are called to give up exactly what we care for most—to give that

most precious element of our lives up to God, and to trust that God will not destroy it, God will not employ the knife or the fire on it. We are called to trust that when we give up that most precious thing, God will give it back—if not to us, then to the world God loves. Amen.