

Family Matters: Tough Love

Genesis 22:1-14
Psalm 13

July 2, 2017

Long before today's passage we see Abraham in all of his glory. He learns that the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah are about to be destroyed because of the wickedness that's there. Not only does his nephew Lot live in one of those towns, but also it just doesn't seem like a God thing to do, blow the place away, especially if there were any straight shooters there who'd be blown away right along with the nasty ones.

So this otherwise obedient guy all of a sudden goes one on one, mano y mano, duking it out with the Divine, the creator of the universe, on behalf of those who otherwise would be innocent victims, and it appears, at least, that God lowers his standards a bit thanks to Abraham's intervention. Abraham is a rock star! He's a hero! Book contracts, guest appearances, interviews, even Oprah wants him!

That makes today's passage all the more striking.

God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you." (Genesis 22:2, TNIV)

Tradition tells us that Moriah is in modern day Jerusalem, site of the Dome of the Rock.

Notice the progression here, with each word penetrating more deeply into his soul:

***Your son
Your only son
The one you love
Isaac***

As if Abraham might not be sure who God might be referring to.

He used to be called Abram when all this started more than twenty-five years ago. Now he was Abraham, which means, 'father of many,' descendants that would be more numerous than the stars in the sky, and now he'd have to give it all back?

Look at the fierce brevity of what happens next:

Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. (v. 3)

The very next morning he set out to get the job done. What do you suppose the intervening night was like? What would it be like for you? Did he sleep at all? Did he fill his wife Sarah in? If so, what might her response have been?

Here's another question: Why do you suppose he was such a passionate advocate on behalf of others in that earlier time, and not on behalf of his own treasure, the son he'd longed for, here in this story?

Imagine friends, well established, hardworking and prosperous, uprooted at the age of seventy five in response to nothing more than what he claimed to have been the call of God. Knocks around, gets in trouble with one king, fights a war against a bunch of other kings, and rescues relatives from certain death. At long last, after twenty-five years, Isaac is born. Wasn't it time to retire, settle down with a nice pension?

Instead,

'Some time later....'

Sometime after Isaac's birth. Perhaps he was a teenager by now, maybe even a young man.

And the questions keep coming.

It was to be a burnt offering, so Abraham himself cut the wood, even though he had servants. How come? What was he thinking then?

Where was Sarah during all this? Did she have any idea what was about to happen?

It took three days to get to where the sacrifice was to take place, Abraham, Isaac, and two servants. Three days! All that time to think it over, to wonder, to be terrified. What did they talk about?

Then, having arrived at their destination and leaving the servants behind, it was father and son, just the two of them.

He said to his servants, “Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.” (v. 5) Do you think he believed that ‘we will come back’ part?

Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. (22.6)

Then comes this conversation, when Isaac asks his father,

“The fire and wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them went on together. (vv. 7-8)

Picture that last sentence in your mind:

The two of them - walking together.

The old man even more bent over and shuffling than usual, with the tools of his trade, weighed down by a heaviness that no one else can see, let alone understand. Next to him is this strapping young man in the prime of life. He’s weighed down as well; only to the casual observer it’s the way it should be. The young guy gets the heavy stuff, but compared with what his dad was carrying, maybe not.

The fulfillment of all that Abraham had been promised and anticipated for more than a quarter of a century,

- taking God at his word all that time,
- risking it all in God’s name,
- and now on the verge of giving it up.

God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering.

As today’s story ends, an angel intervenes, Isaac is spared, and a ram caught up in nearby bushes takes Isaac’s place as a burnt offering, and it begins to take shape.

Abraham is called to sacrifice his son.

God so loved the world that he gave his son.

Isaac carried the wood for his own sacrifice.

Jesus, at least for a while, carried his own cross.

In the end Isaac is spared, but there was no ram at the foot of the cross for Jesus.

In the end Isaac is spared while Jesus dies. The resurrection is real, friends, but not before the death.

Tough love, the Jesus kind of love, is in reality, love for tough times. There's an honest recognition of reality along with a deeper reality on which we build our lives.

Friends, don't ever write off authentic Christianity as well intentioned wishful thinking. Instead of denial, addiction or endless busy work, you and I are called to face the harshest reality with the deepest and only reality that satisfies, heals and transforms.

God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering.

Worthy is the lamb.