

I need to "borrow" your imagination for a moment this morning. I want you to envision in your mind's eye a drab room in a police station where three persons are beginning a conversation. There are two police detectives, one male and one female, and another ragged looking man all sitting around a metal table. With each question they ask, the detectives' voices grow louder and more agitated. The suspect sits calmly, responding with brief answers in a monotone voice, his face showing no emotion. Let's listen in on their conversation . . .

"Sir, do you know where your sons are?", the male detective asks. "Yes," the man replies. "Where are they?" the detective continues. "They are in a better place," he answers. "I don't understand, what do you mean by a better place?" the female detective interrupts. "They are in heaven with God," the man states. "How do you know this? Did you kill your sons?" she asks. "Yes," he replies. "Why did you murder your children?" the first detective demands. "Because God told me to kill them and save them from this sinful world." With that the man starts praying silently, and the detectives begin filling out the proper paperwork.

I don't know about you, but this scene makes me uncomfortable, angry, and disgusted. My reaction is only slightly quelled by the knowledge that the conversation was adapted from a television drama. Although it comes from a fictional world, the story unfortunately is not make believe. It is something we could read, and have read before, in our newspaper. Horrified, we ask questions in an attempt to make sense of

such an unthinkable act. How could a parent do this to their innocent children? What kind of God must this person worship to believe that God would want someone to commit murder? Surely, this person is mentally ill, or at least they must not be Christian! How else could someone think that God, who is loving and just, would desire the slaughter of a human being?

But, wait a minute! Is that last judgment a fair one? Can we say that a person, who has grown up in church and studied the bible, would never believe that God would ask a parent to sacrifice a child? If we are honest with ourselves, then we must admit that the story found in Gen 22:1-18 is very similar to what was portrayed in the television show and the stories we hear on the news. In fact, if the story of the attempted murder of Isaac were recorded in any other place than the bible, we would condemn Abraham's actions and declare him deranged. Yet, for centuries, this story has been the basis for countless sermons about the incredible faithfulness of Abraham. Generations of preachers have stood in the pulpit and encouraged their congregations to have the faith of this great patriarch. Abraham has been painted as the model of complete obedience to the will of God. The fact that he was willing to surrender even the life of his own son is praised as an act of utter devotion to God, one which we too must be willing to carry out if we are to have the faith of Abraham. So, why don't we also praise the faithfulness of other parents who claim God told them to kill their children? Is there a difference?

Christian tradition has seen in Gen 22:1-18 what it wants, or even needs, to see. If Abraham is the father of our faith, then surely he could do no wrong. After all, he

was the “friend of God.” However, this conclusion fails to take into consideration the full picture painted of Abraham in Genesis. Even worse, those who have perpetuated this traditional interpretation of this story ignore the statement it makes about the God of Abraham; the same God we worship. Are we comfortable with the idea that God would seriously expect a parent, or anyone for that matter, to kill another person to prove their faithfulness? Such an image of God resembles a deranged, insecure deity, not the God who hears the cries of oppressed slaves and cares about the widow and orphan. Perhaps it is time to reevaluate Abraham’s performance on this test. Did he pass???

The book of Genesis recounts not only the beginnings of the universe but also the beginnings of a people, the Israelites. God, who created a world and declared it “good” then destroyed creation when things went wrong, has decided to find a new way to restore creation’s original blessing. In an unexpected move, God chooses an elderly, childless couple to be the parents of a nation. Given that Abraham is about 75 and Sarah around 65 at the time, God’s selection seems, at best, absurd. Yet, as the story develops, we see that God is full of surprises in finding ways to keep covenant. Eventually, Sarah delivers Isaac, at the ripe old age of 90, and this otherwise mature couple, find themselves giggling like young lovers. However, Sarah and Abraham have not reached this point in their lives without problems. In a failed attempt to help God keep the covenant, Sarah gives her handmaiden, Hagar, to Abraham so she might bear the promised child. Later, an insecure Sarah has Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away to fend for themselves. Sarah is not the only one with imperfections. Twice

Abraham endangered Sarah's well being to save his own life by having her pretend to be his sister in a foreign land. Only through divine protection does Sarah escape physically unharmed, though certainly with emotional scars from her husband's selfishness. In Abraham's defense, he does argue valiantly with God for the just treatment of innocent lives in the doomed cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Overall, though, the character of this patriarch of Israel remains in question, not just for us but also for God.

The opening declaration by the narrator that the event described in Gen 22 is a test, is an attempt to prepare the audience for what is to follow, much like the disclaimers used for television shows that state that "events and people portrayed in the story are fictional and any resemblance to current events or real persons is accidental." Even with this warning, though, we are disturbed when the nature of the test is revealed. Just the idea that God would ask Abraham to sacrifice Isaac as a burnt offering is incomprehensible. Nothing in the story has prepared us for such a demand. Perhaps, though, what troubles us even more is Abraham's response. Having just come off of the energetic debate over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, we expect Abraham to launch into another defense for the innocent. This would be an easy argument to win, an open and shut case. "You want me to do what with Isaac? You must be out of your mind! No offense, God, but you know better than this. You are a God of love and life not a God who desires death. There's no way I will kill my son, not even for you!" But the champion of the defenseless says nothing and wastes no time in obeying the divine order. He does not tell Sarah what he is going to do because he knows what her

response would be. "Over my dead body! I birthed this child at 90! I don't care what God said!"

To avoid such a confrontation, Abraham takes Isaac, a few his servants, and some firewood, and sneaks out of camp before the first light of day. When they reach a certain point in the road, he leaves the servants and donkey behind, and instructs them to wait there until he and Isaac return. Notice he does not tell them what he is about to do, and when Isaac, bearing the weight of the wood for his own death, inquires about an animal for the sacrifice, Abraham lies to him as well. Although we do not know exactly how old Isaac is at this point, we can surmise that, since he was big enough to carry the wood, he would have been capable of escaping from his elderly father. That is if he had known what was awaiting him at the top of Mt Moriah.

With determination and focus, Abraham arrives at the spot for the sacrifice. He ties Isaac to the altar, and then Abraham raises a knife to kill Isaac before lighting the fire. Our hearts beat wildly as we watch in disbelief. Out of nowhere, a voice cries out, "Stop! Now I know what kind of faith you have!" Like one coming out of a hypnotic trance, Abraham lowers the knife and out of the corner of his eye notices a ram caught in the thicket. After untangling the animal, he frees Isaac and sacrifices the ram instead. Finally we can breathe and applause breaks out for God's last minute rescue of Isaac, but what about Abraham? Is he a hero as well? How do you think Isaac felt about his father? Is it any wonder that the story concludes with Abraham returning from the mountain by himself? I bet Isaac never went anywhere alone with his dad again. What of Sarah's reaction upon hearing of the near death of her son? Legend

has suggested that the shock of such news was what caused Sarah's death.

More importantly, what did God think of Abraham's performance on the test? Was God actually pleased with his unquestioning response? The text records God's reaffirming the covenant promises made to Abraham, and we have assumed that this is done as a reward for his behavior. But, the covenant was never presented as being contingent on anything Abraham had to do. Rather, God's reaction to Abraham's behavior is revealed in the fact that, in the rest of the biblical story, God never speaks to Abraham again. As one who had enjoyed intimate conversations with the divine, Abraham lives the rest of his life without hearing another word from God. What are we to make of this response by God? I believe that like us, God watched in disbelief as Abraham raised the knife over Isaac ready to kill his son. "Why don't you argue with me now, Abraham? How could you confront me about people you did not know in Sodom and Gomorrah, but you have no defense for your own flesh and blood? Do you truly believe I desire your blind obedience and actually would demand the murder of a child? What kind of God do you think I am?" The silence that fell between God and Abraham was the result of disappointment not approval. Because of God's fidelity, the covenant promises would be kept, but the relationship between God and Abraham would never be the same again.

God chose a barren woman and her elderly husband to be the parents of a nation. God liberated a group of slaves from oppression and forgives human failures time after time. God commands us to love our neighbor as ourselves and to seek justice, love kindness, clothe the naked, feed the hungry, and visit the lonely. God

does not require us to take the life of another human being as an act of faithfulness. God calls forth life out of nothingness and instigates new beginnings in the midst of despair. God does not desire unquestioning obedience or religious fanaticism. God created humanity with free will that we might be fitting partners for God. God not only expects that we will argue against injustice and violence, God demands it. Anything less would disappoint God.

The choruses of "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow" that echo through the centuries in praise of Abraham's faith carry with them tragic results of such a biased interpretation of the biblical story and its sinister image of God. Human history has been filled with violence done in the name of religion, and Christianity has played a bloody role in that story. Although we easily declare the guilt of a parent who kills in the name of God today, Christian tradition has glorified the attempted murder of Isaac as the epitome of faithfulness. I wonder if God watches us and asks, "What kind of God do you think I am?"