

MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS

Two detectives and a ragged looking man sit around a table in the interrogation room. 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. "Sir, do you know where your sons are?" the first detective asks. "Yes," he 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 second detective interrupts. "They are in heaven with God," the man states. "How do you know this? Did you kill your sons?" the second detective continues. "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." Then the man starts praying silently, and the detectives begin filling out the proper paperwork. (Lisa W. Davison)

Although this is a fictional story, it is not make-believe. All too often, we are horrified when we hear this reality repeated in the newspaper or on the TV. We ask ourselves how could a parent do this to his or her innocent children? What kind of God does this person worship to believe that God would want someone to commit murder? How is it possible that someone could believe that God, who is loving and just, would desire the slaughter of another human being? These are difficult questions with no apparent answers.

In similar fashion, the scripture lesson from Genesis 22 is hard to get our heads around and grasp the reality of the situation. As I have listened to and wrestled with the text during the past week, I find that I have far more questions than answers concerning this strange interaction between Yahweh and Abraham. What is going on in this story?

Ten chapters earlier, God had called Abraham and Sarah to journey forth to a land that God would give to them; God would make of them a great nation through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed. The years went by and, finally, in their older years, Sarah conceived and bore a son Isaac. The covenant promises were being fulfilled.

However, when Isaac was a young boy, God came to Abraham in order to test him. And here's the test: "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains." It's bad enough when someone hears or thinks he or she hears God talking to them and telling them to do something awful. But, it's far worse when it's the Lord God, who is doing the talking and whose purpose seems so far-fetched!

What kind of God orders "a hit" on someone's only, beloved child? What was God thinking on that day? Why not pick on one of the pagan nations in the area? Why put in jeopardy all that God had promised to Abraham and Sarah? Why did God seemingly go back on the divine promise? Yahweh had already cut Abraham off from his past as Abraham left behind his country, his kindred, and his father's house; and now, did God also intend for Abraham to give up on his future by killing his son and crushing the hope of a great nation that could come into

existence only through Isaac? Given all of God's creativity, don't you think God could have come up with another test for Abraham that would be a bit more ethical rather than this one that goes against Yahweh's own command not to kill? As I said, I have far more questions than I have answers.

And, speaking of questions, why in the world is Abraham so quiet upon hearing this divine demand to sacrifice his only beloved son? You would think Abraham would speak up and argue with God. "Yahweh, did I hear you right? Surely you didn't just say that you want me to kill my son, and thus, my dream of a great nation – a notion that you yourself put into my head. After following you all these years, through the ups and the downs, you can't be serious, right Lord?" Aren't you different from all of the other deities that accept human sacrifice from their subjects or are you just like them after all? Is this really your holy will?

I simply cannot relate to Abraham's closed-mouth policy at hearing God's command to sacrifice Isaac and to offer him up as a burnt offering. I never once believed that God caused our son Andrew to have cancer or that God afflicted our daughter Laura with the number of health problems she has been faced with throughout most of her life. But I surely didn't keep quiet. I have prayed earnestly, pleaded desperately with God to let me trade places with one or both, begged God to make the disease go away, and restore our children to good health and wholeness. So I just cannot relate at all to our tight-lipped, spiritual ancestor, Abraham, and how accepting he was about carrying out the assassination of this promised child. And, I wonder, how would Abraham feel, in future years, knowing that he was a murderer, and of his own flesh and blood?

Here's a bit of irony for you and one more question without an answer. In Genesis 18, Abraham pleaded with God and asked God to spare the lives of people he didn't know in Sodom and Gomorrah; however, isn't it odd (to say the least) that Abraham has no defense to offer for his own offspring?

So Abraham saddled his donkey, took two of his young men with him and Isaac, and they set out on a three-day journey for the place that God had shown Abraham. When they got close enough, Abraham said to his young men: "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you." Did Abraham really mean what he told the men – that he and Isaac would return together – or was it all a smokescreen to throw them off track so they wouldn't get suspicious? And, when Isaac asked his father, where is the lamb for a burnt offering, did Abraham believe that God would provide another lamb or did he simply accept the fact that Isaac was the burnt offering but didn't want to tip off Isaac?

The story comes to an end with Isaac all trussed up atop the altar and the wood. Abraham had his knife in hand and was just about to kill his son with a downward slash of his arm when an angel stayed the execution and ordered Abraham to stand down "for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." That's one crazy story, isn't it?

Here are a few more questions to consider? Afterwards, why did Abraham come down from the mountain alone? Did Isaac want nothing at all to do with his father? Also, from that point on, neither Isaac nor Yahweh spoke to Abraham - why not? And, shortly after this story, Sarah

died. It's been suggested that, when she learned that Abraham had planned to murder their only son, Sarah suffered a fatal heart attack. Did old age get her or was it the shock of Abraham's actions and the near-death of her child?

Yes, I have a lot more questions about this biblical story than I have answers. And yet, there are some answers to be gleaned. Even though the questions far outnumber the answers, I think the sum of the answers far outweigh all of the questions. Here are a few answers that come to mind.

First of all, isn't it wonderful that we have the freedom and permission to question God and ask, "Why?" about the many things that happen to us in the course of our lives? As I am fond of saying, God is a mighty big God; God isn't threatened by our questions. If you aren't sure, go and read the Book of Psalms.

Secondly, while we can ask all the questions we want, God does not answer to us. God is not accountable to us. God is God and we are not; we are God's creatures. And even if God chose to give us an answer, there's no guarantee we could understand God's explanation for God's ways are higher than our ways and God's thoughts go far beyond our own thoughts. Sometimes, faith is living with the Mystery and trusting that God has our best interests in mind – whether or not we can see it.

Thirdly, by story's end, it becomes very evident that God never, ever intended for Abraham to do in his only son. God had every intention of providing Abraham with a way out of his dilemma. God did indeed provide the lamb for a burnt offering in place of Isaac. While we cannot fully comprehend God, nevertheless, we can best see God through the incarnation of Jesus; and, as we encounter Jesus throughout the gospels, we know that the God of love would never hurt or demand the sacrifice of anyone, especially a young child.

This biblical text prompts me to stop and remember times in my own life when I was frustrated and felt that I had come to a dead end. But now, from the vantage point of years gone by, I can see how often God provided a way-out or opened a window or offered me a Plan B, which I didn't know existed. Over and over again, God provides for us in many different ways. Think of a time in your life that God provided you with a way through your own wilderness that led to some new promised land for you. Then, give thanks to God.

As Christians, we read this story and hear within it an echo of Jesus' passion, who like, Isaac, carried the wood for his own execution and who, like the ram, became a substitute sacrifice in our place. By his wounds, we are healed. We remember that God doesn't ask any sacrifice of us that God has not first made for us. We give thanks to God for our Lord Jesus, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.

Finally, here's one more answer that I think is at the very heart of this story. Last week, I quoted Dr. John Claypool, who has been both a friend and a mentor to me – in person and through the various books he has written. In commenting on this passage of scripture, he said that the point of God's testing Abraham was to see if he had really gotten the point after all the years of living with the Lord's wonderful promises. Abraham had done nothing to earn or merit God's offer of a land, descendants, fame, and the chance to bless all future generations. It was

all grace, all God's doings. And God was putting Abraham to the test to see whether he understood all this as grace, pure gift from God, or whether he had fallen into the notion that he deserved all of these blessings.

To illustrate this point, John Claypool tells about the time, during World War II, when his father's younger business associate was drafted and his wife went with him. John's father offered to let them store their furniture in the basement, and the young man suggested that the Claypool's use their washing machine while they were gone. John helped his mother do the laundry and that green Bendix washing machine made their job so much easier.

However, when the man and his wife returned and took their washing machine and other furniture with them, John was very upset and said so. But his mother sat him down and said, "Wait a minute, son. You must remember that machine never belonged to us in the first place. That we ever got to use it at all was a gift. So, instead of being mad at its being taken away, let's use this occasion to be grateful that we had it at all."

Dr. Claypool concludes by saying that he gained new insight through the story of Abraham and his experience with Isaac. What Abraham remembered on Mount Moriah, we would do well never to forget – that life really is, at bottom, totally gift and grace. Life is a gift – every last particle of it, and that the way to handle a gift is to be grateful. (Tracks of a Fellow Struggler, pages 69-83; Glad Reunion, pages 17-19)

Despite Abraham's seesaw kind of faith with all of its ups and downs, the final emphasis is not on Abraham's obedience but on God's trustworthiness. God is faithful even when we are not. God provides for us at all times. And, when we acknowledge the fact that all of life in general – and life lived especially in Jesus Christ and by the Holy Spirit in particular – is a gift (and nothing less), then we would do well to live grateful and gracious lives in response. Thanks be to God! Amen.

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