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Reading Genesis: The Binding of Isaac (Genesis 22. 1-19)

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(Sheeesh!) I wonder how it was for you to hear tonight's reading – the *akedah*, the 'binding of Isaac'? I wonder what your reaction was? I bet it was something like, what's Sarah going to make of this??? Glad it's her preaching, not me. Well, let me start with **two** responses I have tried out over the years.

Here's the 'God has to come out right no matter how wrong his behaviour appears' approach. Despite a natural repugnance at the cruel way God appears to 'test' Abraham and traumatise Isaac we don't feel we can criticise God. We read the story with a slightly guilty conscience, seeking to make God 'right' while at the same time knowing that if it were anyone else, we'd want to be standing up them as a bully and tyrant. I'm reminded of the theological student, who tried to make sense of God's ordering genocide in the conquest of Canaan, by saying that if God commanded it, it must have been good genocide. The second kind of response goes the opposite way. God *is* behaving like a tyrant, and we aren't afraid to say so. This God cannot be taken seriously, ought not to be worshipped and, huffing and puffing with self-righteous fervour, we decide that this Old Testament God has nothing to do with the loving God of Jesus, or that God in general is just a bad idea. I've caricatured both kinds of response – but you get the gist.

Well, let me invite you, for a moment, to stand back from judging the text – from deciding whether you agree, disagree, like, don't like and so on. Let us continue our reading instead by attending to some of the subtleties of the narrative. To help us, I draw on the work of Hebrew scholar Robert Alter and his wonderful translation and commentary *Genesis*.

Our story begins starkly and abruptly with God making a seemingly impossible demand. But notice that the story itself emphasises how impossible and terrible it is. ‘Take your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac’. According to the medieval Jewish commentator Rabbi Rashi, this repetitive chain works deliberately to deepen the anguish of the situation, and Rashi’s commentary draws out an implicit dialogue here between Abraham and God. ‘*Your son*. Abraham replies, ‘I have two sons’. He said to him, ‘*Your only one*’. Abraham: ‘This one is an only one to his mother and this one is an only one to his mother’. He said to him, ‘*Whom you love*’. Abraham: ‘I love both of them’. He said to him, ‘*Isaac*’.¹

When you look at it, the text never misses an opportunity to refer to Isaac as ‘his son’ and Abraham as ‘his father’: verse 3 – ‘Isaac his son’; verse 6 – put the wood on ‘Isaac his son’; verse 7 – Isaac said to ‘Abraham his father’, and he said ‘Here I am, my son’; verse 9 – ‘and bound Isaac his son’ and so on and on and on. Alter says, the text is at pains to ‘sharpen the anguish’ that runs through it, and this comes out also in the pace of the story. As we have seen, it begins abruptly – plunging straight into the drama and taking the protagonists quickly to Mount Moriah. Once there, however, the pace slows almost unbearably and the action happens in slow motion, as Abraham in verses 9 and 10 builds an altar, lays out the wood, binds Isaac his son, placed him on the altar on top of the wood, reached out his hand and took the cleaver.

If we think that what God asks of Abraham in this story is appalling, then that is partly because the story itself invites us to experience Abraham’s agonised reluctance. You can see how this complicates our tendency to read it either for God or against God, as if what mattered was our judgement, or as if the point of the story were some quick moral about unquestioning obedience. Could it be that the story *wants* to draw us into contending with God, *inviting* us to wrestle with what hearing and obeying God might lead to – not just then, but now?

¹ Alter, 103.

Hearing, obeying ... This is also a story about seeing, seeing clearly, seeing truthfully. When Isaac asks Abraham, 'where is the sheep for the offering?', Abraham replies that 'God will see to the sheep for the offering, my son'. God 'will see to' means, in the context, 'provide', but God's seeing echoes a whole list of 'seeing' verbs in the story. Abraham 'raised his eyes and saw the place from afar' where he was to make his sacrifice; and later, 'Abraham raised his eyes and saw and, look, a ram was caught in the thicket by his horns', and then, having sacrificed the ram, he called the name of that place YHWH-yireh, because 'On the mount of the Lord there is sight' – that is, there is seeing and being seen although it is not clear from the text whether it is God or the person who comes to the Mount who sees and is seen. Alter comments: 'beyond the tunnel vision of a trajectory toward child slaughter is a promise of true vision'. And you might remember last week's story of Hagar (significantly, the immediately preceding chapter) – where Ishmael, Abraham's other son, was in deadly peril. Hagar who has named God, 'he who sees me', has her eyes opened and *sees* a saving well. What is it to be seen by God? And how does that connect to our seeing clearly? This too is opened for our contemplation.

And finally, there is the central theme of sacrifice. What is the sacrifice God requires? The true nature of sacrificial obedience? What is *Abraham* being asked to sacrifice in this episode? His child, the son so long promised by God and finally given. Yes. But with him, the assurance of a future – of his name being carried into posterity, his possession of the promise of greatness – that he would be the father of a great nation. In the end, is it really Isaac he is being called to sacrifice?

It's interesting that it is a 'ram' caught in a thicket, that becomes an alternate to Isaac, not a lamb as would be expected. A ram, a full-grown animal – a 'father' animal. Even more mysteriously, when Abraham goes back down the mountain, Isaac is not mentioned as being with him. After so much being made of Abraham and Isaac journeying together and of Isaac being spared, it fails to mention Isaac returning at all. What's going on here? Was there a human 'sacrifice' after all? And if not Isaac,

who? Is it something in the 'father', in Abraham, hinted at in the fact that it is a ram that is offered as the alternate sacrifice? I wonder if it is the part of Abraham that Isaac represented, the self-securing, self-protecting ego that clings to a guaranteed future and that somehow divides Abraham from his truest self and from God. Because the basic spiritual truth is that *this*, for Abraham and for all of us, must be given up, yielded to God, if we are to see ourselves and God clearly. When Abraham returns he is one, reconciled, simply himself.

We can gear ourselves up to think that the sacrifice God requires is to do with our deepest longings and loves, as if they are not allowed, as if this is the way we prove our love of God. This kind of sacrifice is painful, but also somehow dramatic, heroic, noble. At some level, we get to congratulate ourselves on our costly and painful obedience. But the sacrifice God asks is not like this: rather it is one that ultimately unbinds us, sets us free. Perhaps what we think we are asked to sacrifice is just the catalyst for getting in touch with this deeper thing that binds us and needs to be given up. In Abraham's case, his false self was all 'bound up' with Isaac.

The sacrifice of a contrite heart, acceptable to God, is not self-dramatising and noble – but far more humble, even humiliating. It is the sacrifice of our own self-importance, our desperate clinging to fortune and fame, security and significance. First world-war poet Wilfrid Owen caught this vision deeply in his retelling of the story in *The Parable of the Old Man and the Young*.

So Abram rose, [he writes] and clave the wood, and went,
And took the fire with him, and a knife.
And as they sojourned both of them together,
Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,
Behold the preparations, fire and iron,
But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?
Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
And builded parapets and trenches there,
And stretched forth the knife to slay his son.

When lo! An angel called him out of heaven,
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
Neither do anything to him. Behold,
A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.

But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

What if this is not a story about God the tyrant? What if it is God setting someone free, unbinding both Isaac and Abraham, and his seed forever. *We* are that seed. So what about us?

What are you seeing? What is it that still binds you and that God is inviting you to sacrifice in order that you might walk home free, whole and open to a future, which in Christ includes the 'unbinding' of all creation?