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Because You Have Obeyed My Voice (Genesis 22. 1-18)

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Welcome back to preaching, Sarah!! Just a gentle re-introduction by way of one of the most confronting texts in the entire canon!

As you'll know from Susanna's wonderful reflections over the past two weeks, the lectionary has been taking us to the book of Genesis and – if you like – to the 'origin story' of the people of Israel. This is a story that begins with an account of God calling Abraham – then named Abram – to leave his homeland in Ur and to journey into the unknown, into 'the land' says the Lord 'that I will show you'. The reason? A promise. 'I will make of you', says the Lord, 'a great nation' and through you 'all the families of the earth shall be blessed'.

That was back in Chapter 12 and we read there that Abram set out readily enough, with his wife Sarah (then called Sarai) and his nephew Lot, and with all their possessions, for Abram was already seventy-five years of age and a man of some means. As it turned out, however, God's process of bestowing blessing was far from straightforward. For Sarah and Abraham, it included the stress of living as strangers in foreign lands over long years, their welcome and security always provisional. It involved the deep and recurring grief of childlessness, God's promise of offspring – descendants – seeming almost cruel in the face of its persistent failure to eventuate. And (as you've heard over the past couple of weeks) when children, finally do arrive, first Ishmael born to Sarah's slave-girl Hagar, and second Isaac born to Sarah herself, the trials of this little band only seemed to increase. According to this story of origin, the fragile emergence of a new people of God is attended by confusion, rivalry, the painful severing of family ties, and finally – shockingly – this near sacrifice of Isaac. Some road to blessing this is proving to be ...

I have preached at Benedictus on the binding of Isaac before. I tried to say something then about how we might respond to what seems to us its moral outrage.¹ A God who would ‘test’ a father and traumatise a son in this way, demanding this kind of proof of fealty – what kind of God is this? How is such a God worthy of our love and trust?

Part of what I suggested in that earlier reflection was that before we get too self-righteously carried away judging the God depicted here, we might attend to the way the story encourages its readers to contend with exactly this question. Indeed, as scholar Robert Alter remarks, the text itself is at pains to ‘sharpen the anguish that runs through it’.² It never misses an opportunity to refer to Isaac as Abraham’s son and to Abraham as ‘his father’. If **we** think that what God asks of Abraham in this story is appalling, that’s partly because the text itself invites us to experience it like this. ‘Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love ... and offer him as a burnt offering’ (Gen. 22.2). This is no glib morality tale but an incredibly complex and finely wrought literary achievement. So what is it really about? Why is it here? Today, building on Susanna’s reflections, I’m hoping we can reflect a bit more on how this episode functions in the whole of Abraham and Sarah’s story, and how this story *as a whole* speaks to God’s vision for human being.

Fittingly in the light of our recent Benedictus series, theirs is essentially a story of call and response, or of call and learning what it means to respond. It begins, as we’ve already seen, with call. God gets the action underway, telling Abram to leave his father’s house, promising blessing in return for obedience. It continues with response – Abram goes. And for the next twenty-five years, adventures, mishaps and missteps ensue, during which, at certain critical moments, God offers a further word or appearing. Scholars speak about this period as a long process of education. Abraham is learning more and more deeply what it means to trust or to have faith in God. He’s learning more and more deeply how to relinquish his future into God’s hands.

¹ https://benedictus.com.au/files/pdf/the_binding_of_isaac_280614.pdf

² Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1996), p.103.

The passage we just read is the culmination of this process. And this is signalled clearly in the Hebrew. God directs Abraham to ‘Go forth to the land of Moriah’, to an unspecified place, to ‘one of the mountains that I shall show you’, just as at the beginning of the story God had called him to ‘Go forth’ from his father’s house, to an unspecified place, ‘to the land that I will show you’. The Hebrew word for ‘go forth’ occurs nowhere else in the Bible. It’s paralleled use at the beginning and end of Abraham’s story is surely no coincidence.³

But what makes this terrible test the necessary culmination of Abraham’s journey? What distinguishes this *theological* imperative to unconditional trust from the kind of abusive *psychological* imperative in which someone might say, if you really loved me, you’d ...? Commentator Paul Borgman offers a suggestion I find helpful. He notes the connection between our capacity to receive the fullness of blessing God would bestow and our necessary relinquishment of the inclination to cling to life, possessions, identity, on our own terms.⁴

At the beginning of Abraham’s story, he’s asked to let go the security of his father’s house to follow where God will lead. And he does. But over the years, he remains anxious about his success, attached to securing his future and the fulfilment of his life. God has promised him offspring, promised that he will be the ancestor of a multitude of nations (Gen. 17.5), yet the fulfilment of that promise is seemingly withheld and withheld and withheld. Finally, with the birth of Isaac to Sarah, it seems his faith has been rewarded, his future secured. But then comes the real test, the ultimate refinement of his trust in God’s provision and call: will you relinquish what you seem at last to possess? Can you entrust yourself utterly, when God asks you to step out once again?

At one level, it does seem cruel ... As if God is a god who would hurt us to prove a point, dispossess us of our dearest loves to test our allegiance. As if Isaac is no more than a dispensable prop in the ascetic education of his father. But if we look more

³ Paul Borgman, *Genesis: The Story We Haven’t Heard* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), p.103. See also Alter, *Genesis*, p.50.

⁴ Borgman, *Genesis*, pp. 102-103.

closely I think the story is deeper than this. After all, what is Abraham really being asked to sacrifice in this episode? Is it Isaac? Or is it something in himself? It's interesting that it's 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. Could it be that the real sacrifice being demanded here is the part of Abraham that Isaac represents, the self-securing self that clings to a guaranteed future? Could this be the theological point of this psychologically so confronting story?

And if something like this is a possible interpretation, then the question becomes what is it about the willingness to relinquish ourselves, our future, our attachment to identity that God deems necessary? What is it that matters so much about the willingness to entrust ourselves wholly to One who lies beyond us and whose future we never fully grasp? Is it that God deliberately wants to make our lives more difficult, to control us by keeping us in the dark and drawing us into what we most fear? Or is it to do with how such radical entrustment keeps us alive and open – open to hear, responsive to possibilities we have not imagined and cannot yet incarnate?

When God stays Abraham's hand, God twice says: 'now I know that you have not held back your son, your only one, from me'. Borgman notes that the Hebrew word for 'holding back' can mean 'hoard', as a miser who withholds wealth from the public good. It can also mean 'prevent', as in a person who prevents something from happening. Says Borgman: 'Abraham must not *hoard* this seed, making it his private good'.⁵ He must not prevent the real fulfilment of the promise by clutching at it. Listen again to the text: 'By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you ... and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice'.

The great insight of the Hebrew tradition is that faith is the condition of radical receptivity and of ever-expanding being, because faith is what opens us to the fullness

⁵ Borgman, *Genesis*, p.106.

beyond us. Faith turns us from self-enclosed, self-securing individuals to persons radically open to God and so capable of being blessed and becoming a blessing. We practise this faith, this radical entrustment, every time we sit down to meditate – as we let go our plans and agenda, our self-image, our attachment to the stories we tell of ourselves and others. In meditation, self-surrendering prayer, we open ourselves to the fullness beyond us and in this way, like Abraham and Sarah, our ancestors in faith, we continue faithful to the journey on which we're called.