

Abraham's Radical Trust

Genesis 22:1-19 by Patty Friesen (Feb. 19/16)

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I was hoping to avoid this bible story since it is another one of those difficult ones. The kind of God that asks for a child sacrifice to test a faithful servant and then at the last minute pulls away with “Just kidding,” seems to be a challenging God to believe in. Professor Ellen Davis at Duke Divinity School says the point of this story is not to make people want to believe in Abraham's God who is of course, also Jesus' God and father. Rather this harrowing story exists to help people who already believe make sense of their most difficult experience, when God seems to take back everything they have ever received at God's hand. The point is not to draw people in to faith but rather to help people who are already in stay in – stay in relationship with the one true God, even when their world turns upside down.

It is quite common for theologians to hold up Abraham as a model of unquestioning obedience to God, but that's misleading. After all, obedience is a virtue only if it serves a just cause. Obedience in service of an unjust cause is cowardly, even criminal as we learned definitively from the Nazi trials in Nuremberg and in the My Lai massacre of Vietnamese civilians during the US war. If it is purely out of obedience that Abraham submits to God's command, then his willingness feels servile and weak with no thought or conviction. What if Abraham follows God's command not out of obedience but out of faith? What if Abraham trusts God, even now, when what God asks of him seems to run counter to everything God had promised?

It is trust, not blind obedience that binds Abraham to God. This comes from the great 20th century Jewish theologian Eliezer Berkovits, who is one of the leading thinkers in Jewish theology after the Holocaust. In his probing and wrenching book *With God in Hell*, Berkovits asks these questions: Why did so many Jews keep their faith in the ghettos and the Nazi death camps? Why did they gather to say prayers and keep Sabbath, or circumcise their children as a sign of the covenant, even as the SS literally beat down the door? Why did they keep blessing God as the Holy One of Israel instead of cursing the God who seemed to have abandoned the Jews?

As he puzzles over these questions, Berkovits turns to this story of Abraham, and what he discovers is the bottomless trust that holds Abraham together with God. Here is what Berkovits imagines Abraham saying to God during those three days of hell as he follows God to Moriah, the place of unspeakable sacrifice:

In this situation I do not understand you. Your behavior violates our covenant; still, I trust You because it is You, because it is You and me, because it is us...Almighty God! What you are asking of me is terrible...But I have known you, my God. You have loved me and I love You. My God, you are breaking Your word to me...Yet I trust You; I trust You.

What Berkovits shows is how intimate the relationship between God and Abraham is. Abraham is with God in hell, the way long and well-married people are together in the worst moments of the life they share. The marriage metaphor is apt, because Isaac is the child of this union between God and Abraham, the miraculous child of the promise of blessing and offspring. And in the strangest of all paradoxes, that is why Abraham is ready to do what God asks, even to the point of taking a knife to his child. Abraham trusts God totally with the life of the child they share, the life that God has given, in the midst of this life-shattering thing that he does not understand at all.

Abraham knows only this: life and life with God are the same thing. Like the Jews who risked their lives to observe Sabbath in the death camps or to circumcise children in the ghetto, Abraham is incapable of choosing survival- even his child's survival- over life with God. For better or for worse, it is simply too late for him to live apart from God.

Total, radical trust is the only thing that makes any sense of Abraham's submission to God. But still, we have to ask: Is God trustworthy? What kind of God would submit Abraham to this appalling test? Either God is a sadist or God calls for this test because God needs to know, desperately needs to know whether Abraham is completely devoted to God. It is theologically unconventional to say that God Almighty needs to know something God does not already know but that's the clear logic of this test. Remember, Abraham is the person on whom God had chosen to rely completely. After the flood, God had almost given up on humanity, after we had filled the whole world with violence, God decided to move forward in relationship with the world. But there was a condition: from that point on, Abraham and his seed are the one channel for the dissemination of God's blessing. Abraham is like a prism: he focuses God's blessing and spreads it through the world like a rainbow stream of light.

God has staked everything on Abraham, even the whole world. Yet there is serious reason to doubt that Abraham has staked everything on God. Abraham and God have been in a relationship for decades now – it is already a long marriage but there are signs that Abraham still does not totally trust God that he is still looking out for his own interest. You might remember those stories of Abraham passing off his beautiful wife Sarah as his sister when they travel in foreign territory. Sarah gets taken into the royal harem as a concubine, not once but twice, and Abraham gets protected status as her

brother. God never tells Abraham to do that. He does it because he's scared; he might be killed if someone wants Sarah, knowing she's his wife. Abraham puts Sarah in that terrible situation because he does not trust God to pull them through the danger.

Abraham's lack of trust puts God in a terrible situation, too. God is counting entirely on Abraham as the challenge for overcoming the world's evil with divine blessing. If Abraham does not entirely trust God, then all hope is lost. If Abraham tries to secure his own wellbeing apart from God, if he holds back anything, even his beloved child, and tries to protect him from God, then it would be better if the world had never been made. This is what this test is about: trust, the delicate yet potentially durable link between God and ourselves on which everything, even the whole world, depends.

Placed front and center in the Bible, this story makes it clear that the thing we call faith is not in the first instance a matter of what we *think* about God, any more than a good marriage or our deepest friendships are held together by what we *think* about the other. The relationship endures only because two hearts are bound together through mutual trust. And trust is the very opposite of compulsion. Trust is how you relate to others when you don't try to control them by force of manipulation. The astonishing trust Genesis 22 reveals is that God chooses to relate to the world not by compulsion but by trust.

Yet trust is inherently a condition of vulnerability. You can be disappointed by the one you trust and deeply, deeply hurt. God's own trust makes God vulnerable; God is grieved to the heart by human evil, as the flood story in Genesis tells us. We do not often think of God as needing to be courageous, yet it must take courage for God to stay in relationship with the world just as it takes courage for each of us to stay in relationship

with God. We have already experienced grievous disappointment, and we know that more pain lies ahead in ways we dare not and should not try to imagine. Everyone and everything we love in this world is passing away, although later or sooner we do not know.

We have to ask: What kind of way is this for God to run the world – a way that is inevitably fraught with so much disappointment and pain on both sides? And the answer is: This is the way of love, for mutual trust is the only environment in which love is wholly free to act. We know this from the earliest intimacy, the relationship between parent and child. Trust is the only environment in which love is wholly free to act for our good.

It's the same relationship between the divine Parent and the Son. The absolute trust between God and Jesus is the environment in which divine Love is wholly free to act for the good of the world. The God who is wholly Love chooses to trust us, so that the fullness of divine power may be unleashed to work through the lives of those who trust God wholly. This is what we see in Jesus' cross, death and resurrection: trusting love that suffers on both sides, and working through that love God's boundless power to save. As Christians have always seen, there is a story line that runs straight from Abraham, Isaac, and God at Mount Moriah to the cross and resurrection. It's the story of trusting Love on which the whole world depends.

Relationship with the real God, the God of Abraham and Jesus, is not for the risk-averse. The book of Genesis puts it to us straight: sometimes being in relationship with the real God hurts. Sometimes it's bewildering: we'll be inching along in the dark, with no vision of where this relationship is taking us. But the gospel also puts it to us straight:

it's taking us to the cross and on to resurrection. It's taking us straight into the arms of God. It's taking us into a parent's aching yet indomitable love, the divine Love that will not let us go – not ever. We can put our trust in that! Let us pray:

Thank you God for the trust of Abraham and Sarah and all those who have gone before us. We also put our trust in you even as we wonder and sometimes doubt. We have no other hope. We have no other faith. So lead us in gentleness and be very near to us. Amen.