

God's Vulnerability Meets Abraham and Isaac's Desert Camping Trip

Isaac Singer once wrote "Yes, God is a writer, and we are both the heroes and the readers. We know that the angels have nothing but praise. Three times a day they sing: Sublime! Perfect! Great! Excellent! But there must be some angry critics, too. They complain: Your novel, God, is too long, too cruel. Too little love. Too much sex. They advise cutting... But about one quality we all agree: God's novel has suspense." Well it is entirely possible that Singer had just finished reading the Book of Genesis when he wrote this.

Last week we began at the beginning with the first of the two creations stories in the Old Testament Book of Genesis. This week we took a huge leap forward, which although dictated by the liturgical calendar is unfortunate. We have now dropped ourselves into a story already significantly in progress.

The Book of Genesis is divided into four parts. The first part contains the primeval creation story. Part two is the story of Abraham. Part three contains the Jacob cycle and part four is the story of Joseph. Because Easter and subsequently Pentecost were so late this year we miss four weeks of stories leading up to today's Genesis reading. These stories set the stage for making sense of this story which if thought of as reality is a hideous story and give credence to all those who think of the Old Testament God as cruel, mercurial, and temperamental. Although I might wonder if our day camp counselors hasn't occasionally dreamed of binding a or camper or two at three am on the overnight when they simply won't stop talking. But let us catch up to this story "already in progress".

We have missed the story of Noah and the Flood. We missed God calling a man named Abram. Abram was a wealthy tenth generation descendant of Noah who was married to a beautiful and barren woman named Sarai. When Abram was 75 God came to him and told him to go to a new land which would belong to him and all his descendants, an interesting promise to a 75 year old man with a wife who is unable to bear children. Godly Play tells the story of Abram in this way...

"This is the story of Abraham, the father of the Great Family. He and Sarah went from Ur to Haran and then on into a new land.

And when they came into the new land, Abraham went up on a hill at Shechem to pray and God was there. He prayed to God at Bethel, and God was there. Then they pitched their tents in Hebron, and God was there too.

God promised Abraham and Sarah that they would be the mother and father of a great family. The family would be as many as there are grains of sand in the desert, stars in the sky and dust in the land.

But Abraham and Sarah had no children.

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Then three strangers came out of the desert and told them that they would have a child. They laughed. The child was born. And they named him "laughter".

This is where the Godly Play story meets up with our story today. Yes in the Godly Play story of Abraham we tell the story of the binding of Isaac. The Godly Play story does leave out one or two details. It leaves out the name change of Abram to Abraham and Sarai to Sarah. It leaves out the rite of initiation into this new covenant, circumcision. It leaves out the story of Sarah's handmaid Hagar, who bears Abraham a son, named Ishmael. And it leaves out the jealousy of Sarah which sends Hagar and Ishmael out into the desert, proving to us that being a son of Abraham is a dangerous proposition. The Godly Play story does however make a VERY important point... God was there. The Godly Play story teaches what we learn when we work our way through the whole story, that there is a genuine relationship between God and Abraham. One in which both have exhibited a deep faith in each other. One where they have engaged in significant theological conversations, one where God consulted with Abraham regarding the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham has not been reluctant in the past to question God.

In the rabbinic tradition today's Genesis reading is referred to as the tenth and climatic test of Abraham. The traditions differ a little on what the previous nine tests were depending on whether one follows the Ashkenazi or Sephardic traditions, although parallels do exist. Given that the rabbis were men you better believe that there is no debate around whether circumcision was one of those trials, it was. While these are called the tests of Abraham it is important for us to know that God is being tested here too. Let me repeat that... God is being tested too. God doesn't have a backup plan here, and God has been planning for this since the sixth day of creation. Remember Abraham is the one person whom God has invested his relationship and his new covenant in.

God called Abraham and Abraham answered. The answer has been translated as "Here I am" and it was the best the translators could do for the Hebrew doesn't directly translate to English. The Hebrew word indicates readiness, alertness, attentiveness, receptivity and responsiveness to instructions. Day Camp staff I encourage you to teach this phrase to your campers first thing tomorrow. Abraham responds "Here I am" three times in this passage to three different beings.

When Abraham responds to God a dialogue begins in which we are missing half, but the greatest rabbis have offered us commentaries in the Aggadah, which are legends or sermons and non-legal interpretations of the Talmud and Midrash. These commentaries help us fill in the dialogue but also do a wonderful job of exploring the why and I wonder questions.

God - "Abraham take your son"

Abraham responds "I have two sons"

God - "Your only son"

Abraham "Both are only sons, Isaac is the only son of his mother, and Ishmael is the only son of his mother"

God - "The one whom you love"

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Abraham - "I love both sons"

God - "Very well, Isaac"

God then gives Abraham the instructions to go and make his son a burnt offering on a mountain, making this request specifically a religious act. Abraham, Isaac and two other young men then begin a three day walk to the place God had indicated. When the four arrive in the place that God indicated we get our first indication of what Abraham has been thinking. He tells the two young men journeying with them that they are to remain while Isaac and Abraham go to worship and then "we will return". This could mean one of two things. Either Abraham is lying or Abraham trusts in God and believes that both he and Isaac will return. We are given no indication that Abraham is being deceitful though. Abraham trusted that God would keep the promises that God made, to create a great nation through Isaac who was at this time unmarried and had no children.

Isaac called out to his father and Abraham answered "Here I am" for the second time. Isaac asked where the lamb for the offering was and Abraham responded that God would provide. Isaac knew what was going on. He wasn't oblivious. Isaac chose to follow his father, trusting him. He knew of the relationship between God and Abraham. He not only trusted his father but through his father trusted God. Abraham's trust became Isaac's trust. Upon arriving at the top of the mountain Abraham bound Isaac and laid him out on the altar.

There are a number of pieces of artwork depicting this particular scene and the artists overwhelmingly have interpreted the scene incorrectly. Caravaggio shows Isaac frightened, tied face down struggling to get away, while Abraham looks away from his son. Rembrandt has positioned Abraham's hand over Isaac's face. In both of these and others Isaac has become an object and Abraham is determinedly but unemotionally ready to kill his son. What the artists missed was that which develops in any deep relationship, the great vulnerability of Abraham, Isaac and God and the great trust in their relationships with each other.

Abraham wasn't passively going about his work, he was miserable. He had gotten this whole way believing that God would show a different path and one hadn't been presented yet. Abraham was distraught, he was standing with tears in his eyes. The Aggadah tells us his entire body was "all but afloat" in tears. Abraham looked up to heaven, cried in anguish and asked for help! (pause) In response God sent two beings. God sent an angel, and God sent a ram. The angel called out to Abraham who responded for the third time "Here I am" and the angel stayed Abraham's hand. God also sent a pure white ram. This ram had been created and placed in the Garden of Eden at twilight on the sixth day of creation for this very purpose, and had been running for days to get to the mountain. The ram became the burnt offering which the Lord did provide.

God is not a detached observer throughout this story, for God has risked a great deal. This isn't just a test of Abraham's faith in God but it is also a test of God's faith in Abraham. If Abraham fails he loses descendants. If God fails God loses that which God

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created the world for. God loses the covenant and those who God created to be God's co-creators in this world. If God fails God loses us! There is great shared vulnerability here.

I have a tough time with this story for both the obvious reasons, human sacrifice is not exactly my favorite subject, but also for the great vulnerability which is a deep component of this story. I am not good at vulnerability. Being vulnerable can be terrifying. I am afraid of looking weak, stupid or incapable, all of which I associate with vulnerability. Being vulnerable would mean that I am less than perfect. I am vulnerable though and I am considerably less than perfect. I am not comfortable with people knowing that though, particularly not in this place.

Both Abraham and God model for me a different reality, God's reality. In their relationship with each other they showed great vulnerability, modeling for me what an honest relationship with God is and what an honest relationship with others should be.

Throughout the Genesis story of Abraham we get a sense of his personality. We learn about the relationship between God and Abraham and that this relationship is primarily one of promise and blessing. We are not spared the aspects of anguish and ugliness in Abraham's family. It is the story of the ever developing and deepening relationship between God and Abraham. This is the story of God overcoming obstacles to the promises God made, through both miracles and guidance of human events. It is not the story of Abraham as a perfect servant of God but as one who has some serious lapses along the way to becoming an ideal servant. Abraham develops into a man who is obedient to God's commands, who is faithful even when the promise seems impossible, who is gracious, generous and hospitable. He is committed to justice and compassion even to the point of questioning God about God's decisions.. and Abraham is vulnerable.

This is the only Sunday when we hear the story of Abraham in this cycle, so I am going to finish this part of the story. Sarah, Abraham and Isaac were never all together again. You can bet though that if they had been together again Sarah would have put her foot down about Abraham and Isaac NEVER going camping again! Sarah died when her heart burst with joy upon the news that her son was alive, she was 127 years old after all. Isaac went off to marry Rebekah, and Abraham married his second wife, Keturah, who by some accounts was actually Hagar, but you have to talk to me later to get that part of the story. Godly Play ends the story this way...

"Then Sarah, Abraham's beloved wife, died, and he buried her in a cave at the end of the field near the Oaks of Mamre. After Abraham helped find a wife for Isaac, he died, and was buried in the cave beside Sarah. Isaac and his wife Rebekah had twins, Esau and Jacob, so the Great Family grew."

Amen