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Living the Questions
Genesis 22:1-14

The story of God asking Abraham to offer his son, Isaac, as a sacrifice has been a mystery for years. When Karen (Velkey) asked me early last week, in preparing for today's children's sermon, what Sunday's text was to be, I said, "You don't want to know!" "I'd go for the 4th of July or another topic altogether."

Strange, isn't it, that this story has been included in books of "Children's Bible Stories" with sketches of Isaac being tied to an alter of wood with a ram depicted in the background, caught in the brush. What do you do with a Bible story like that?

One way to cope with the violence of such a story is to theologize about it—God was testing Abraham's faithfulness. The idea does have potential. Would a person be willing to sacrifice his (or her) future—the future given by God—for God. After all, Abraham and Sarah waited until they were in the nineties before having their first son. (Don't forget that Abraham had a son by Sarah's handmaiden at Sarah's insistence, and his name was Ishmael.) Now God is asking Abraham if he trusts him enough to give up his and Sarah's only link with the future by using Isaac as a sacrificial offering to God.

The Jewish people understand something about scripture that western Protestants and Catholics have a hard time with. If it begins with, "and he told this parable," or "he told them this story," or "once upon a time..." we get it. We know that we are about to hear a story loaded with truth even though it may not have happened exactly like that, or may not have happened at all. If it doesn't begin that way, particularly within scripture, we think it has to be regarded as literal in every respect, and we often miss the real truth intended. Don't forget that the Koran includes the same story of Abraham being asked by God to offer his sacrifice his son, except that the son's name is Ishmael, rather than Isaac.

Actually, some of the Old Testament stories, like some of the New Testament stories, were told and written as parables even though they don't state that it is a parable or begin with "once upon a time."

Sitting in my lectionary group again this past Tuesday, our Rabbi friend listened to the discussion on Matthew's text until we went to the Genesis text with its continuing saga of Abraham. From last week's story of Sarah demanding that Abraham get rid of Hagar and Ishmael, his other son by her, and drive them out of the land, we came to this week's lectionary reading of God asking Abraham to make a sacrificial lamb out of Isaac.

The mystical element of a good story is that it holds the potential of many truths whether or not it happened just that way.

Traditional takes on the passage were recounted. A 2008 book on the 22nd chapter of Genesis was noted: *Abraham's Curse: The Roots of Violence in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. (After reading a review, I wouldn't recommend that one.) In line with this book, someone else noted the possibility of Isaac prefiguring Jesus in this passage—Isaac being offered as a sacrifice to God; Jesus becoming God's ultimate sacrificial lamb. I don't encourage you to go in that direction either.

Finally the rabbi spoke. "Abraham failed again." The conversation paused. "Could you say a little more about that," someone else asked. "In last week's text, Abraham didn't listen to the right voice of God, he didn't struggle with God for justice over Ishmael and Hagar and simply sent them away. In this week's text, he does the same thing; he doesn't question God about the justice of offering his son as a sacrifice."

Perhaps he was listening to the voices of society around him which sometimes offered a child as a sacrifice to the gods, rather than listening to the true voice of Yahweh. "The Jewish way has always been a way of arguing with God—negotiating with God, hammering out one's feelings and thoughts about life with God," Rabbi Dror said.

When Sodom was about to be destroyed, Abraham *did* negotiate with the angel of God.¹ “Will you really kill righteous people along with the wicked?” Abraham asked God. “If there are fifty righteous people, will you destroy them in your attempt to destroy the wicked?”

“If there are fifty righteous, I will not.”

“How about forty-five? Will you then spare Sodom.”

“If there are forty-five, I will spare Sodom,” the Lord said.

Abraham continued to press God with his logic until God agreed to spare Sodom if ten righteous people could be found. As you remember, even ten could not be found, and Sodom was destroyed.

One of the other stories about Moses is told in relation to Muhammad’s renowned Night Journey to Heaven where God instructed Muhammad that his people were to pray fifty times a day. On Muhammad’s way back to earth, he stopped in the sixth heaven where he reported the instructions to Moses. Moses was incredulous. “Fifty time a day!” he said. “You’ve got to be kidding. That will never work. Go back and negotiate.” Muhammad did so and reported back to Moses that the number had been reduced to forty times a day. “That is still too much,” Moses protested. The routine was repeated four times more with reductions going to thirty, twenty, ten, and finally five prayer times a day. Moses said, “I have tested men before your time and have labored most earnestly to prevail over Israel, so go back and ask him to make things lighter for your people,” but this time Muhammad refused. “I have asked...till I am ashamed, but now I am satisfied and I submit.” The number of prayer times remained fixed at five.²

One of my favorite plays and movies has been *Fiddler on the Roof*. A favorite not only because the main character, Tevye, struggled to find the limits of his flexibility, but also because he was in constant dialogue with God. I saw the Broadway production with Chaim Topol, who was also chosen for the role in the movie, cast in the character of Tevye. As he pulled his milk cart from place to

¹ Genesis 18:23-33.

² Huston Smith, *The World’s Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions* (HarperSanFrancisco: 1991), p. 245.

place making his daily deliveries, he struggled with God, working out the dilemmas of his life. “On the one hand...” he would argue with God and himself, “but on the other hand...” he would continue. He protested against God:

Oh, dear God...

...You made many, many poor people. I realize of course it's no shame to be poor, but it's no great honor either. Now what would be so terrible if I had a small fortune?

...I know, I know. We are Your chosen people. But, once in a while, can't You choose someone else?

...Sometimes I wonder, when it gets too quiet up there, if You are thinking, "What kind of mischief can I play on My friend Tevye?"

...It may sound like I'm complaining, but I'm not. After all, with Your help, I'm starving to death.

Questions. Jennifer can be full of them at times. When I confront her that she is using them to avoid answering *my* questions—that it is a shrewd defense mechanism—she simply says, “I know. I learned it from Jesus.”

In Rainer Maria Rilke's classic, *Letters to a Young Poet*,³ he offers a stunning plea and argument to this young person to live an authentic life. In his ten letters—his responses to the questioner—Rilke addresses the silent questions that exist in the deepest chambers of our own hearts. In his fourth letter, he argues for his young friend to trust in nature.

*Have patience with everything that remains unsolved in your heart. Try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books written in a foreign language. Do not now look for the answers. They cannot now be given to you because you could not live them. It is a question of experiencing everything. At present you need to **live the question**. Perhaps you will gradually, without even noticing it, find yourself experiencing the answer, some distant day.³*

“Live the questions.” That has been a mantra of mine for years. For us in our western theology, to question God or to struggle with God seems to us disrespectful and borders on being an infidel. But for Jacob, struggling with the Angel of God during the night—struggling with God—became his point of liberation from a life of ongoing deceit and cheating.

³ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet* (Dover Publications: 2002), p.

Questioning God—struggling with God—is the Jewish way. And, I became convinced this past week that understanding this truth is necessary to understanding the story of Abraham and Isaac.

Wrestling with God over the important issues of life, wrestling with God when the voices of society are tempting us to be conventional, wrestling with God when we don't know which way to go, but are earnest about going the right way—in the right direction—is essential to being an authentic person. As we wrestle with God, we begin wrestling with ourselves, also. You question God, then you affirm your deep belief even though you don't understand life. You wrestle with the issues of life and this world, then you find yourself confessing your sin of being selfish and shortsighted. Read the 42nd and 43rd Psalms. "Why...why...why...?" the psalmist questions God. Then, he comes to his position of repose: "Hope in God; for I shall again praise him."

As a Jewish teenager in the Auschwitz death camp, degraded and suffering, facing the possibility of unjust death, Elie Wiesel witnessed three Jewish scholars trying God in their own makeshift concentration camp "court of law" and finding God guilty of crimes against humankind. After reflecting on this outcome, Wiesel witnessed, they recited their evening prayers.

Prayer

Lord, our questions would not exist without our belief and trust in You. What you well know, we often have a hard time understanding. Guide is in our affirmations and in our questions, particularly for those who are just now committing themselves to you, through the name of Christ we pray. AMEN.

Genesis 22:1-14

¹After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ²He said, "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 that I shall show you." ³So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. ⁴On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. ⁵Then 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." ⁶Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. ⁷Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" ⁸Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together.

⁹When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. ¹¹But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ¹²He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." ¹³And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴So Abraham called that place "The LORD will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided."