

From the Pulpit

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“Abraham and Isaac: Fear and Trembling”

***Genesis 22:1-14; Romans 6:12-23;
Matthew 10:40-42***

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 3, June 29, 2014, dedicated to the birth of Alice Mae Cook on Friday, June 27, 2014, daughter of Frank and Stephanie Cook and granddaughter of Sue and Frank Cook and always to the glory of God!

“Abraham and Isaac: Fear and Trembling”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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What is the Spirit saying to the church today: In your hearing and in your living of God’s holy word; at First Church; in relation to the Offering of Isaac by Abraham? What is the Spirit of God saying to you and to me about the fear and trembling we encounter in Genesis 22?

Let’s listen to the story with these questions in our hearts and minds....

As you know, Abraham is the father of our three faiths – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In today’s text, we encounter the most celebrated episode of the patriarch’s life.

All three faiths hail it as the ultimate expression of Abraham's relationship with God. But what the incident actually says, where it took place, even which son is involved are all matters of centuries old dispute. All this – and more – makes the "*Akedah*" - or "the binding" - the most debated, most misunderstood and most combustible event in the entire Abraham epic (drawn from Bruce Feiler's Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths, William Morrow, NY, NY, 2002, p. 84).

In his series, Genesis: A Living Conversation, Bill Moyers invited theologians from all three Abrahamic faiths an opportunity to reflect on Genesis 22. If you want to see the combustibility and challenge of this text, I encourage you to listen into their entire conversation. While all acknowledge this is a story which begins and ends with God – first God testing Abraham and then God providing for Abraham and blessing him – that is where their agreements end.

Questions swirl.... What kind of God would require his chosen one to sacrifice his beloved son? Why would God put these demands on the "Father of all Faith?" What kind of father would do it (Heavenly or Earthly)? What kind of mother is Sarah that she is silent through this entire passage (only to die immediately after Abraham returns from Mt. Moriah?). What kind of son (whom all agree was

older than a boy) would carry the wood, lie down on a mountaintop on the pile of wood and await the knife of execution? Why to any and all of this? Why do we resist it and find ourselves repulsed by it? Why do we not embrace it as the truest story of ultimate sacrifice for God and faithfulness to God? What is the purpose of this story?

In Genesis: A Living Conversation, an imam reflects, *“God puts you in this world in order to test you. The whole of life is a test. The test that Abraham is put to is the supreme test. The question is – how can we attain the faith of Abraham that we do not possess?”*

To which the rabbi responds: *“If this is the faith required to follow God, I don’t want to follow such a faith. As a parent, I am horrified by this story. If this were my test, I would flunk it. I would not and could lay my child on the altar of sacrifice.”*

The Christian theologian and mother respond, *“Isn’t that the point? Throughout scripture God is the tester. But at the same time, God is the provider. God is calling Abraham and all of us out of our parental idolatry. The great giver of the gift of life is saying, ‘do you worship the gift more than the creator who gave you the gift?’”* (drawn from Genesis: A living Conversation a PBS series with Bill Moyers, Doubleday, NY, NY, 1996, pp. 220-247).

Do you see what I mean by the swirling nature of the questions? Let's take a closer look...

There are three stunning voices in this text. 1

The first is the abrupt voice of God – a *voice of savage sovereignty* which opens the 22nd Chapter of Genesis. God calls God's faithful servant to take his son and offer him up as "an offering" on Mt. Moriah (which means the Mt. of Seeing!). (Note: there is no mention of "sacrifice" here...only "Offering"). Early the next morning, Abraham, Isaac and two servants set out. When they get close to the mountain, Abraham tells the servants to wait here. Father and son will worship on the mountain and they will return together to the servants. Clearly he believes Isaac will survive. Isaac is not so sure.

As they depart, the second voice arises. This is Isaac's voice – *the voice innocent pathos*. The son asks his father in total bewilderment, "Father, where is the sheep for the burnt offering?" Abraham answers, "God will see to the sheep...." Pathos and silence descend as father and son silently ascend the mountain and set up the sacrificial site. If the story has not yet gotten under your skin, this would be the place for your itchiness to begin.

Finally, everything is ready on the mountaintop. The sacrifice is all set. Isaac is on his back looking up at his father, Abraham's blade lingers in the air against his son, his

only son whom he loves (according to the text), as the eyes of father and son are locked, the third voice speaks – not God’s voice, not Abraham’s voice, not Isaac’s voice - but the voice of an angel – *a voice of stunning generosity*.

“Abraham, Stop!” A lamb appears in the bush nearby. The sacrifice is completed. Everyone breathes a sigh of relief. But, father and son do not come down the mountain together. In fact, their relationship – according to the scriptures – is never the same again.

After the voices of savage sovereignty, innocence pathos and stunning generosity dominate this text, silence settles into Genesis. Silence envelopes the text of Genesis. God never speaks to Abraham again. Abraham and Isaac never speak to one another again. Abraham never speaks to God again. The angels never again appear. Sarah never laughs or speaks again. She dies in the very next chapter. Isaac loses his father mother – and his father – to a great extent. Some say, he suffers from post traumatic stress. The entire family system suffers. Isaac fathers the nation, but he becomes blind and mostly speechless. Because he cannot see and he struggles to perceive his own reality, he is later deceived by his own sons. He is fragile and wounded. He is never the same.

But this silence runs deeper. After Genesis 22, no place else in the Hebrew Bible mentions the binding. Not David,

not Solomon, not the prophets, no poets, no existentialists, no historians, NO ONE for at least a thousand years talks about the binding. It is not until the Jews face intense persecution and exile that writers begin to talk about the offering on Mt. Moriah. In this period, all of the sudden, Isaac is presented as a dutiful son, a willing sacrifice – “The Lamb of God...” By the time of Jesus, the story of Genesis 22 – treated in silence for centuries – is transformed into the defining moment of Abraham’s life. In time, Jesus is called the new Isaac, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.

In the end, we are left with a story that shakes our sensibilities, faith, and trust in God to the core of our being. We are left quivering and shaking wondering what really happened on the Temple Mount – for Mt. Moriah is the mount on which the Temple in Jerusalem is constructed. (Right beside Mt. Moriah is the Mt. of Olives, on which the sacrifice of Jesus becomes clear).

Faithful action consumes this story. But, not without fear and trembling. In his classic book, Fear and Trembling, existentialist author, Soren Kierkegaard writes: *“If anyone on the verge of action should judge himself according to the outcome, he would never begin. Even though the result may gladden the whole world, that cannot help the hero; for he knows the result only when the whole thing is over, and that is*

not how he became a hero, but by virtue of the fact that he began.”

Certainly this is true in Abraham’s case. But, the effect is deep and long lasting.

Can we still say with unwavering voices, “Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church?” I believe we can and we should. But, I also believe this story is so visceral, so real, so threatening and frightening, so enriching and so traumatizing that it opens our hearts and minds to difficult and true struggles in life and faith.

We live in a vastly imperfect world. Our calling – in the spirit of God – is to come down from Moriah’s mountaintop and to speak and to act justly. We are called to take this story – in all the obvious struggles it creates – and be faithful. Such a struggle is not meant to be easily resolved or simplified. It is called to be as real and visceral and true as the one we heard in our text today. Wrestling with God is our calling. Let us not hide from this but engage it. It will be for us the hardest and most meaningful and the most faithful work we will do. Amen.

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1. The image of the three distinct voices is drawn from Walter Brueggemann’s commentary on Genesis found

in Texts for Preaching – Year A, Westminster John
Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1995, pp. 381-382.

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