

The Binding of Isaac

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Being “Chosen” is not about being right when all others are wrong, being the winner or the favorite. When, as Christians we received the Sacrament of Baptism, we were claimed by God. My words: that we would love and be loved. We were not vaccinated against problems, given security against life’s hardships, or guaranteed we would like everything that we received. NO, being Chosen demands that knowing and recognizing the problems of life, we have to wrestle to trust and believe in God and forgive one another.

I fear I buried “the theological leap of faith” I made at the end of our sermon on God’s promise of Isaac. This Leap of Faith did not come from any commentary, treatise, or other person’s sermon, but from my conviction. I believe Genesis leads us to this Leap of Faith, as follow-through from Sodom and Gomorrah. God is GOD, and “Chosen” we still are human creatures. God could have destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah without informing Abraham in advance. But being Chosen, knowing through Baptism of God’s Love, Abraham dared to challenge God: if there were 50 persons who were righteous, could the most profane city in the world be saved? Must the good be discarded because of evil? According to Genesis, God offered assurance that if there were even 10 righteous persons, Sodom and Gomorrah could have been saved. My Leap of Faith is IF there were only ONE person, One who could remain faithful to God no matter what, faithful to the Covenant, God would forgive the whole world everything. AND, that if there were not even One, God would become that righteous person for us, for our forgiveness, even if it meant his sacrifice. That leap of faith is not explicitly written in Genesis, was not handed down by St Augustine, Anselm, Luther or Calvin, but I believe is the foundational Assurance of Christian Forgiveness.

Now, as Pastor Diane preached, the promised miracle has taken place, Isaac was born to Sarah! A year later, Sarah witnessed Ishmael playing with her son Isaac and Sarah became jealous. Only then is it revealed to Sarah that Ishmael, her slave’s child is Abraham’s firstborn son, so Sarah forced Abraham to exile Hagar and Hagar’s son Ishmael. To be EXILED is to be cut off, to be lost, to be dead to Abraham. Yet, according to Genesis, God still HEARD Ishmael. As Diane named, the NAME ISHMAEL means GOD HEARS/GOD CARES. Ishmael grew to be a man, Father of a Nation, whom we know first to be the hairy Ishmael-ites; and 600 years after Jesus through their Prophet Muhammed, Islam. What I find striking is that eventually when Abraham died, the brothers Isaac and Ishmael came together to bury him!

This morning’s sermon focuses on what many describe as the most problematic idea in the Lord’s Prayer. Most of us appreciate God being OUR FATHER in HEAVEN; even more, that daily we look to God to give us what we need for life as sustenance. We can even logically reason the Golden Rule: that we need to forgive others because we have already been forgiven. The problem phrase is: “Lead us not into Temptation.” Do we believe God tempts us, God tests us? We would rather assign temptation to Satan, than to believe “God tests us.” Augustine, Anselm, Luther and Calvin each asked “Who could survive?”

The simplest interpretation of this Genesis story is the traditional Christian that the Indigenous Canaanites practiced human sacrifice; and the descendants of Abraham in the 3 great religions named that “profane”. SO what in Christianity we title “The Sacrifice of Isaac” is the story of Abraham following Cultural Norms, Peer Pressure to sacrifice his own child, the Gift from God, when something inside Abraham cries out, and he saves his child from his own sacrifice giving God a Father Ram instead of Isaac as a sacrificial lamb.

Soren Kierkegaard described working to understand this story all his life, and the deeper he went the greater his struggle. Ultimately, Kierkegaard claimed that “the Sacrifice of Isaac” pointed beyond “Morality over Cultural conformity”, to the distinction between Faith and Ethics. That while Ethically we know it is a sin to kill, Abraham had faith in God, his willingness to make God’s Miraculous Gift into God’s Sacrifice was stronger than his ethical prohibition against murder. Because of which, according to the Letter to the Hebrews, “His faith in God was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness”.

Yet a third interpretation of this “Sacrifice of Isaac”, is that after waiting, hoping, praying for a Miracle, our history is to find fault and take the gift for granted when we are no longer praying to receive.

Oddly enough, the Koran of the Muslim faith has this exact same story, word for word, with two exceptions. Instead of being “The Sacrifice of Isaac” the Muslims call this “The Sacrifice of the Beloved,” and according to the Koran, they describe the Beloved of Abraham was taking Ishmael up the Mountain, not Isaac. The core distinction between Israel and Palestine, between Jew and Muslim, is whether the beloved child of Father Abraham is Isaac or Ishmael. Both have the same story, on the same Mountain, with the same Father Abraham. According to the history of the Middle East, Islam claimed being children of Ishmael; Israel claimed being children of Isaac.

The crux of this story, this TEST, comes down to a Question, “When you have longed for the impossible and you finally possess that lifelong desired gift, do you love the gift more than you love the Giver?” If so, we have made the Gift into an Idol that we worship more than God. Can a “Chosen” people, still choose an Immortal Invisible God?

After attaining more than 100 years of age, when Abraham and Sarah had longed to have a child by any means necessary for over 20 years, and miraculously all our dreams come true, what then? When this Corona Virus has a cure, not just a Vaccine but a Cure, do we only desire to return to live our lives and behaviors? DO we expect Survival of this Pandemic to be a miracle, or an accomplishment that will make us stronger for facing the next challenge? The test is Life and Death, the temptation a marking point in your life. According to Genesis, Abraham was told to “take your son, your only Son, the one whom you love, and sacrifice him.” Do we hope that if God gave us a child after age 100, that God could do so again? Do we avoid thinking about it and about faith in God? When hardship comes do we give up believing in God? Do we go up the mountain prepared to give our own life instead of that of the child? Can we trust and love, when our life and reality and hearts are broken?

As Human Creatures who claim relationship to God as our Creator, we each independently have within us a Freedom of Will. Even as all-knowing and all powerful as God is, the point of the Test is not to score a 100, not even PASS/FAIL, but rather that even an All-knowing God cannot yet know, because we do not know whether we would hold true to the covenant or not, until faced with temptation. So we pray, as Jesus did in the Garden at Gethsemane, “Let this cup pass from me, but not my Will, Thy Will be done.”

Judaism has a different name for this Test, Judaism refers to Genesis 22 as “The Binding of Isaac.” According to Judaism, this Test is not about the Righteousness of Abraham whether he will follow through, but rather about the Righteousness of ISAAC, that as horrible as life may be, Trust that God will provide.

30 some years ago, I traveled to the USSR with a group of Presbyterian Lawyers, Judges and Ministers and their spouses. We saw incredible churches, speaking with Russian Priests, Lawyers and Judges. On the final day, we met with the highest Appellate Judge in the Soviet Government’s Judicial Court System. After her lecture and our questions, she said “I have a Test for you.” She looked me square in the eye and said “If a teen ager took her life, what would you as pastor do?” I said “I would probably have known this child

all their life, having carried her in my arms at Baptism, and hopefully her parents, teachers would have seen this coming and said something. But if the worst happened, I would rush to her, to hold her up before God and pray with her family." The Justice said, "In the Soviet Union, the State gives the Priest what is to be read as the sermon and prayers, we dictate righteousness. When you left the sanctuary of the Church and went to the child and her family, you broke the Law and would be judged guilty for prosteletyzing." She paused and then said, "But I think the ones who have suffered are the children sacrificed."