

THE UNBINDING OF ABRAHAM

(Genesis 22:1-14)

One of the benefits of the preached word in our midst is that, from time to time, we are led to more distinctly hear and see the situations of some of the characters in the scripture stories that are *not* considered the heroes and the she-roes of the story; *not* considered as worthy to even BE considered; *not* regarded as “precious in God’s sight” enough to waste our Christian sympathy on.

In the case of some of the stories from what we Christians are used to calling the Old Testament—but what in reality we would do better to call the Hebrew Bible—these characters of scripture we are referring to not only include those who are considered the *communal enemy* on the battlefield (like the Philistines, or the Canaanites); but they also include many *women and children* who are considered *family members of the household*, as well as many other persons who may be attached to the household, *but who are not free*.

It has been seen that the nature of our societies—both then AND now—is a nature that tends toward *patriarchal, infanticidal, privileged, prejudiced, classist, racist, and nationalistic*. We therefore find that *women, children, minority populations, foreigners, those who are poor, or those considered “deviant” in myriads of ways*, are considered *expendible* in the sight of such societies, as well as in the sight of the writers of the history of those societies—even and especially *religious* history. Those expendible and covered-up voices are why we rarely hear from those who are considered to be inconsequential in the prevailing narratives of life.

However, in keeping with our often-prevailing theme of looking at what is before us through a different set of lenses, this morning we look at a well-known patriarchal story through the lenses of some other characters in the story that we don't usually get to hear from.

II.

Our sermon text today—the story of Abraham hearing God command him to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice on Mt. Moriah—is a well-known story in a series of well-known stories about Abraham. We know the stories in the book of Genesis about Abraham being called by God from his father’s home, with the promise that he himself would become the father of a great nation (ch.12); the travels and travails of he and his wife Sarah, including Abraham twice trying to pass off Sarah as his sister (chs.12, 20); Abraham’s fathering of Ishmael through Sarah’s Egyptian servant Hagar, and the subsequent banishing of both mother and child from Abraham’s home (chs.16,21); the birth of Isaac, and the eventual fateful trip they took up Mt. Moriah (chs.21,22). By and large, we have heard these stories in their writing and in their telling from *Abraham’s* perspective, and seen them through Abraham’s lens.

But let’s look at the Abraham narratives through a *different* lens, and first ask some questions from *Sarah’s* perspective. Do we ever hear

how *Sarah* feels about being uprooted from what she has come to call home, and made to travel to a strange land? How expendable to her husband must *Sarah* have felt when Abraham allowed her to first be taken into the Egyptian pharaoh's harem (ch.12), and then a second time into King Abimelech's harem (ch.20)—where both times she was rescued by the hand of God instead of the hand of her husband? Do you imagine that *Sarah* really felt listened to by Abraham as she tried to explain her complicated feelings in the situation involving Hagar's pregnancy, and the subsequent birth of Ismael? How likely is it that Abraham told *Sarah* that he was taking their only son up a mountain to offer him as a human sacrifice? Those questions come from the perspective of a wife, and they are questions that are not dealt with in the Abraham narratives.

Let's look at the story which is our sermon text through an even different lens—through the lens of Isaac. Isaac has been portrayed in this story as a non-anxious, non-afraid, not-very-talkative young boy

who—even though he had an inkling he was about to become a human sacrifice—didn't flinch or fight, but obediently cooperated with his father when it was sacrifice time! Closer to reality is probably Isaac nervously talking his father's head off as they walked along; Isaac inquisitively asking a million questions along the way; Isaac crying and resisting as his father tied him up and prepared him for the sacrifice; and Isaac being traumatized for life as his father placed him on the makeshift altar, held him down, and reached for his knife!

It seems that the singular lens we have been used to seeing these stories from don't take into account how some of the less-considered characters may have felt about Abraham's actions.

III.

Now let's look through an even different lens, and that would be the lens of God; the same God who promised Abraham that his seed would become a great nation; the same God who self-defined to Moses the attributes of being the Great I AM, being gracious and merciful, being

slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love! The same God that woke you and me up this morning, and got us started on our way!

And knowing and believing that God's ways are not our ways, and that God's thoughts are not our thoughts, and that God's will for us is not always our will for us, then perhaps drilling down a bit deeper into these patriarchal stories—past what we have always been taught, past where we have always stopped—can give us a provocative and challenging view from a celestial lens.

These narratives have always been held up to show Abraham as a model of faithfulness, being willing to sacrifice his son because of believing he heard God tell him to. I'm going to take a risk this morning, and suggest to you that, through the celestial lens of God—the God that we just described—what Abraham models for us today is not *faithfulness*, but *unchecked patriarchal privilege*.

- ✚ The kind of *unchecked patriarchal privilege* that led him to prostitute his wife Sarah not once, but twice—but God came to the rescue both times;
- ✚ The kind of *unchecked patriarchal privilege* that led Abraham to cast his child Ismael, as well as the child’s mother Hagar—who was probably sexually taken by force—into the wilderness to die—but God was there to rescue them both;
- ✚ The kind of *unchecked patriarchal privilege* that had him ready to make his long-awaited son a human sacrifice, a burnt offering, in God’s name—but God was there to rescue both Isaac and Abraham.

God’s very nature would be to not require Abraham to sacrifice or destroy his relationships with his wives and children in order to give honor and obedience to God. God wasn’t asking Abraham to choose between covenant and family. God wanted Abraham to learn that by

-serving one, you serve the other. Making decisions to sacrifice his family—in any way—was not a sacrifice God wanted from Abraham.

But as he lived out his *unchecked patriarchal privilege*—privilege which was the social norm for the time—I suggest this morning that Abraham didn't fully feel his family situations through with the *compassion*, and the *empathy*, and the *patience* that God may have wanted. Otherwise, God probably wouldn't have had to rescue all the family members that Abraham threw into the river!

Abraham was *all bound up* in a *blind obedience to God* that made his family disposable; *all bound up* with a *single-mindedness* that was so set on tasks that it could not see the larger picture of God's love; *all bound up* with an *inability to pause and reflect* long enough to hear the multi-layered voice of God—a voice that seeks to speak to us on many levels of our being, and about many and varied things, including and especially the ways of love that we are to show to one another.

Imagine Abraham, all bound up in his *unchecked patriarchal privilege*, a privilege that has him playing God in the lives of others—even others that he loves.

Unchecked privilege has done all that and much more—but that’s a sermon for another Sunday . . .

So God decided to unbind him!

IV.

God called Abraham, told him to go to Mt. Moriah—a name that has been interpreted to mean *Mountain of Seeing/Teaching*—and offer Isaac as an *olah*, a word whose root could either mean a burnt offering, a raising up, or an offering-up. The meaning Abraham hears is a meaning that goes along with Abraham’s penchant for sacrificing his family in order to honor and love God; he hears *a burnt offering*.

Imagine Abraham beginning to obediently, and without question, carry out what he understands to be God's words. Just as everything is arranged, and he's holding Isaac down, and preparing to raise the knife—the voice of an angel calls his name, and he *pauses!* He *pauses* from the blind obedience he is bound up with that was about to destroy he and his family. By stopping, by hearing the voice of the angel, by putting down his knife, Abraham is able to raise up his son to God—not as a burnt sacrifice, but as an offering of thanksgiving!

Abraham is finally able to love both God and family at the same time.

But Abraham's unbinding is not complete—not until he is shown the *ram in the bush*. Mind you, it wasn't a *lamb* in the bush, it was a *ram* in the bush! It wasn't the *baby* sheep, it was the *daddy* sheep!

What was caught in the bushes, and had to be unbound on the Mountain of Seeing/Teaching was a sacrifice not for *Isaac*, but for *Abraham!*

What was caught in the bushes, and had to be unbound on the Mountain of Seeing/Teaching, was a symbol of the dangers of ramming ahead without listening long enough to hear God!

What was caught in the bushes, and had to be unbound on the Mountain of Seeing/Teaching, was the seeing and teaching of a different way of trusting God—a more *reflective way*, a more *loving way*, a more *compassionate way*.

Abraham was learning the way of the cross. Not the way of playing God in people's lives. Not the way of taking life. Not the way of ramming ahead with only your interests on the table. But the way of the cross. Because the way of the cross is not about YOU; it is about how YOU love OTHERS.

Amen.

