

The Will of God

#3 of Sermon Series

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Genesis 22:1-14 – The Binding of Isaac

June 29, 2008

The theme I chose some weeks ago for this sermon is The Will of God. It was a difficult choice, given the deeply troubling story from Genesis, about the binding of Isaac. As someone in the Wednesday Bible Study class said: “It’s an appalling story – a grown up story. Not for the faint of heart. It’s not ‘G’ rated. It’s not ‘X’; it is definitely ‘R’ – but, she goes on, aren’t we supposed to put away childish things and to think and reason and puzzle through and tease out and get all shook up by God?”

She is right. I’ve found myself grasped by this story, compelled to wrestle with it and finally to try to make some sense, especially in connection with how we might think of God’s will as having any part in it. We know the story. It’s told in Sunday School, scary as that might seem. But I don’t remember being scared back then, probably because the ending, like that of a fairy tale, erased the scary parts. The ram was provided and they all lived happily ever after.

But now, as an adult, as a mother, I find it horrifying. Horrifying in its presentation of God, horrifying in its presentation of Abraham. The narrator tells us up front that this is a test by God, but Abraham doesn’t know that! A God who makes cruel demands, causes horrible punishments (like all the trials of Job) just to test people’s faith? Isn’t there enough pain and suffering built into the fabric of existence without such testing? What about the God’s grace and loving acceptance I’ve been talking about and how our faith is a response to that? Can it be God’s will to put us to the test and make us prove ourselves in this way – to demand sacrifice of what is most dear to us just to see if we’ll do it – even though God knows we won’t have to actually go through with it? This seems utterly cruel and manipulative. This portrayal of God seems good fodder for atheists. If faith involves resigning oneself to what is asked of Abraham as God’s will, I find myself unwilling and unable.

Which brings us to Abraham. What in the world was going on with him? The same God who asked him to leave his home and ancestry, his whole past, and journey to a new place, and who promised him and Sarah a child in their old age who would begin a whole new nation and future – now this God is telling Abraham he must sacrifice Isaac – murder the child given by God, destroy the fulfillment of the promise.

I find the stark telling of the walk to the mountain chilling. How could Abraham bear it? What were the wonderings and fears of the little boy – and finally terror as he was bound and placed on the altar? Wouldn’t he have been screaming? Shouldn’t

Abraham have been sweating, shaking, throwing up even, as he made the murderous preparations? Shouldn't he have pulled back, never reached for the knife, refused to obey the command of his God?

Instead, he's ready to go through with it, and only at that point the angel intervenes, revealing the test, and the ram in the thicket is provided. Knowing this ending, we preachers can seek to explain the story in reassuring terms, something along the lines of how when we face the worst, God will come to the rescue. And maybe it is a story of radical trust – that because God had kept God's earlier promise of a son, God would spare Isaac.

I don't buy it. I don't buy a transactional God who demands a blind faith and sets us up for murder to prove it. I don't buy a God who wills his followers through Jim Jones to drink the lethal Kool-Aid. I don't buy telling a parent who has lost a child to leukemia or had a son blown up in Iraq that it was God's will. I soured on that theology a long time ago – most poignantly on a hot summer night in 1983 at Children's Hospital where I was doing chaplain training.

A very young couple came in with their 10 day old daughter, Nicoletta, who was near death from an untreated fever and infection. They hadn't realized how ill she was, and now it was too late. She died in a couple of hours. A grandmother was with them and tried to console them by saying it was God's will, and that God would send another child, a boy next time. They were from another Christian tradition, and I held my tongue, trying to simply comfort and be with them. Part of this was to be with them as they held the small body one last time. The grandmother handed her to me to put back on the bed – it was actually the first time I'd ever seen or touched a dead body. She was so limp and light, such a tragic little bundle. I'll never forget how she felt. Later, alone and awash in tears, I also grew angry – seeing the death as the opposite of God's will. I saw it instead as the result of young and inexperienced and ignorant parents and a lack of social support. The death shouldn't have happened, needn't have happened, but blaming the parents would have been even worse than blaming God.

Back to our story about Abraham and Isaac and God. I want to examine it in a different way. As in many Bible stories, God is personified, speaks, appears in the form of an angel. There is dialogue between Abraham and God, just as there is dialogue between Abraham and Isaac. Abraham gives the same answer, "Here I am" to God, to Isaac and to the angel calling from heaven, as if all three exchanges were of the same kind. What if we have lost that way of believing in God as some celestial personage? What if the story is about Abraham's devastating internal confrontation with something he is doing based on some primitive tribal custom? What if, suddenly, from the deepest well of his being, the heart of his love for his son, he just can't continue? There must be another way to serve God! The agony of trying to fulfill the sacrifice is too great, and

something within him stays his hand, and he says “No, No!” to his God – and, in the next moment, the ram, a new option, appears. Is God there in the midst of Abraham’s tortured struggle? Is the test a challenge to evolve in his understanding of what God requires? Maybe God’s will is for us to grow and change in our understandings of what love demands.

I’m trying to understand this story as one about our own collective and individual development towards new insights and behavior in our time, and in our history. We go about living one way – keeping slaves, until, fueled by violence and sacrifice and bloody war, we no longer can. We were willing to go along, and then we weren’t.

We oppressed women and used the Bible to justify it, until we no longer could sacrifice the intelligence and energy and intuition of half of humanity on the altar of male dominance. We were willing to go along, and then we weren’t. We’ve kept gay and lesbian people in the closet and discriminated against them – stifling their unique identity, disqualifying their loves – until we can’t anymore, and, in its wisdom, the majority of the Episcopal Church is no longer willing to sacrifice the dignity of the gay and lesbian people on the altar of a rigid and unchanging orthodoxy.

All of these conditions – slavery, oppression of women and of gay people – were once thought to be God’s will. Now, they’re not. We evolve in our humanity, and, as we do, our understanding of God and God’s will changes as well. (And because God is indeed hidden, invisible and never fully knowable to us, as our closing hymn so beautifully declares, this is not to say that God or God’s will is shaped or changed by us – rather that our own intuitions of this God can and do change – and that perhaps it is indeed God who reshapes them – the angel who stops the knife – offers a new way.)

And so we come to our contemporary Abraham and Isaac situation. Our continuing willingness to sacrifice our sons and daughters, although mostly not ours, but the sons and daughters of others, in war. And yes, there are, or have been, just wars, and sometimes the sacrifice is deemed worth it, even by the soldiers, even by their parents. We send them off, uniformed and armed and trained, to sacrifice them on the altar of national interest, in service to the god of patriotism and American hegemony. Or, more charitably – we make this sacrifice to spread democracy and freedom. Maybe it’s worth it. There are things worth fighting and dying for, and sometimes even the most painful sacrifice is worth it to bring about a greater good.

But maybe, just as with other forms of human brutality, God’s will is for us to come to a different understanding about this contemporary form of child sacrifice and to find a new way to settle the struggles among nations and peoples over power and wealth and resources. Where is the ram in the thicket for our time – what will stay our hands?

Perhaps God's way of testing us is not as cruel as it seems in the story of Abraham and Isaac. Perhaps God's challenge and God's will is for us to look honestly, to be awake and aware, truly present to how we live and behave. Perhaps God's challenge and God's will is for us is to question ourselves about how love is served in the ways we treat each other. And perhaps these challenges, these tests, are not to set us up, but to transform and free us. Maybe it's not about Abraham trusting God to spare Isaac, but God trusting Abraham to hold the knife. Maybe it's not about us trusting God to make wars to cease, but about God trusting us to find new ways to live together. That is a test worth taking, a trust we dare not betray. Amen.