

THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN PULPIT

Faith's Progress

A sermon preached June 29, 2008 by the Rev. Dr. Jeffrey S. O'Neill

Genesis 22:1-18 After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ² He 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." ³ So 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. ⁴ On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. ⁵ Then 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." ⁶ Abraham 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. ⁷ Isaac 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?" ⁸ Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together. ⁹ When 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. ¹⁰ Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ¹² He 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." ¹³ And 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. ¹⁴ So 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." ¹⁵ The angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, ¹⁶ and said, "By myself I have sworn, says the LORD: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, ¹⁸ and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice."

Romans 6:12-23 ¹² Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. ¹³ No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. ¹⁴ For sin will have no dominion over you, since

you are not under law but under grace. ¹⁵ What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! ¹⁶ Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? ¹⁷ But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, ¹⁸ and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. ¹⁹ I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification. ²⁰ When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. ²¹ So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death. ²² But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. ²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I clipped and saved a brief article from *Newsweek* back in February by Kathleen Deveny. Titled *Talking to Kids About God*, Deveny writes about how challenging it is for her to teach her daughter about religion. She calls herself “a cafeteria Catholic,” by which she means she picks and chooses which church doctrine she follows and which she doesn’t. But, her selectivity in doctrines doesn’t make her any more capable with her daughter’s religious education; it is talking about faith at all that gives her pause. “Sometimes I think it is easier to talk to my daughter about sex than about God...I’ve discovered I’m just not that comfortable discussing the mysteries of faith,” she said.

Up to that point I was sympathetic with her – after all, which of us hasn’t struggled with the challenging questions kids ask and which of us hasn’t sought the advice of others on how to handle such things. But, my solidarity with her was brief, as it turned out – I abandoned our budding comradeship in the very next paragraph. “Other parents share my ambivalence,” she wrote, and quoted a Protestant acquaintance, who said, “I kind of play down the religious aspect of church,” her friend said, “which is easy when you are a Presbyterian.” This friend had more to say: “At a recent parents’ meeting to discuss what we would like the Sunday school to teach, I got quite a few funny looks when I said I didn’t want a lot of emphasis on the spiritual side of things.”

The funny looks from the other parents only partially redeem the article’s point. I want to repeat a quotation from last week’s sermon from Teilhard de Chardin, French philosopher and Jesuit priest. He said, “We are not physical beings seeking a spiritual experience, we are spiritual beings having a bodily experience.” To downplay “the spiritual side of things,” as Deveny’s friend requested of her child’s religious education, is to downplay what it means to be human. The “spiritual side of things” is where our capacity to enter into communion with meaning, with truth, with God lies. No other being, so far as we know, has this capacity or this potential. No other being is blessed with – some might say “cursed with” – the knowledge of God.

William O'Malley, another Jesuit teacher, observes, "We are the only species that is incomplete, whose nature is not an inevitable blueprint but an invitation. Every rock, rutabaga, and rabbit fulfills God's intentions without insubordination. They have no choice but to glorify God with an obedience that is, more exactly, helpless conformity. Only we, of all creatures, can choose not to live up to the inner programming that invites us by a quantum leap above even the most intelligent animals. Each of us must discover the directions in which we will find fulfillment. This is – or ought to be – the goal of a lifelong education: not merely to make a living but to find out what living is for."

The education O'Malley speaks of is a religious education, a spiritual education, and it is a task each of us must undertake for ourselves, and for our children, if our lives are to have meaning, even if and when it is a frustrating quest, even when our searching questions remain unsatisfied. As a contemporary writer has put it, "At its most profound, faith is not an answer to life's questions but a willingness to inhabit the darkness of knowing that there are some things we cannot know." As to Deveny's struggle to answer her daughter's questions, what's wrong with her saying, "I'm not sure; I don't have all the answers, but we can look for them together."

One of the ways the Bible can be read is as a progressive record of humanity's spiritual quest. This is a different kind of quest from trying to understand the material world around us, since there is no direct, tangible way of connecting with the spiritual, for God is not a thing we can hold and describe and analyze. God is infinite and we are finite, God is the source of existence and we are merely participants in that existence, God is spirit and we are flesh, but as de Chardin suggests in his marvelous phrase, we are nonetheless spiritual beings having a bodily experience.

So, in the Bible we are given stories about how others have experienced the intersection of the human and the divine. Through poetry and drama and the high arts of wonder it feeds us clues to the spiritual quest, uses metaphors to suggest what is found, and relies on the common experience of human life to evoke in our heart's imagination the shape of what has been discovered, and suggests images by which the nature of God might be understood.

The traditional way of reading the story of Abraham and the sacrificing of Isaac is as a kind of morality play that teaches faithfulness, a faithfulness so complete and a devotion so full that Abraham would go to any length to prove it, including the murdering of his son. Admittedly, the story is set up that way, with the first verse saying that God is *testing* Abraham. In this respect the Abraham and Isaac story becomes a kind of scriptural echo to the story of Job...except, not quite. In the story of Job he is identified as a blameless man. It is clear that he has done nothing to deserve what he gets.

Abraham is quite a different character. He is nowhere described as blameless and, in fact, comes across in some of the stories about him as rather craven and deceitful. For instance, his wife Sarah is described as very beautiful. When famine drives the family into Egypt for survival, Abraham passes Sarah off as his sister for fear that if the Egyptians knew she is his wife, they will kill him to

get her. So, he lies and calls her his sister, which frees the Pharaoh to take her in as a concubine.

So, what are we to make of a man who is so cynical, self-serving and fanatical about his faith that he would share his wife and kill his son for his God? What are we to make of such a desperate and debased story? I am aware that there is an essential unfairness on one level to apply our modern ethical standards to ancient times. It is the case that in his nomadic life Abraham would have wandered through and among cultures that did whatever necessary to survive and routinely practiced human sacrifice to propitiate their gods. But whereas the Torah forbids human sacrifice, in this story there is no wavering, no questioning, no “did-I-understand-you-correctly-God?” query just to check on whether it really was the case that Isaac – the only son of aged parents, the one chance for an heir Abe and Sarah were going to have – was to be killed?

What kind of God was this? What kind of improvement did this theology represent over their neighbors’ pagan theologies if child sacrifice constitutes the same bloody liturgy? And given our modern understanding of the preciousness of life in general and especially the preciousness of our children, and given our painful awareness of suicide bombers and various other forms of faith-based mayhem in our time, how can we accept the terms of the traditional reading of this story: that blind faith at the most tragic cost should be a model to admire? Let Deveny explain that to her daughter, or better to her son, that such is the character of faith that we surrender sense and decency in order to propitiate the blood thirst of god.

Of course, good wins out...just in time. The fire is ready, the knife poised to plunge, but God’s angel stays Abraham’s hand. Isaac is spared; Abraham has passed the test. And we are spared from having inherited a religious tradition of human sacrifice.

But I suggest to you that this is not what this story is about. That is, it is not about Abraham's faith being tested, but Abraham's ability to discern the true nature of God that was being tested. Not whether Abraham's devotion to God was so blind and so fanatical as to cross all boundaries of decency and natural affection, but whether humanity itself has the capacity to discern qualities above that of their animal nature, whether humanity has the capacity to grow in understandings of God and therefore grow in the understanding that life is to be made holy, and complete, and compassionate, and good by rising above who we are innately and growing to what we may become spiritually.

So, I suggest to you that this story is not a morality play about murderously fanatical faith. It is, rather, a parable about humanity's progressive growth and discernment in understanding the nature and the demands of God. The key to understanding this insight is the ancient Hebrew word *'raah'*, meaning *to see*. It occurs in one form or another more than four times in this story. The first time we encounter *raah* is in verse 4, *On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away*. Abraham has been directed by God to go to Mt. Moriah (which itself is a variant of the verb *to see*) and sacrifice Isaac, so he looks up and sees the goal of their journey from a distance.

Of course, our vision is not that good from a distance. Whether we are trying to make out a road sign, landscape features, or God, we don't see that well from far away, and it is easy to misunderstand or misinterpret what we see, or to fill in the gaps of our seeing with imaginative nonsense. Far away from his understanding of God, Abraham thought he was to sacrifice his son for God, just like all his pagan neighbors did.

The next time we encounter *raah* is in verse 8, and here it is unrecognizable in English: *Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son."* *Raah* is translated *God...will provide*. Perhaps a good way to think of this is to rephrase it as *we'll see when we get there*. Again, from a distance it seems that Abraham's God is just like all the other gods he has encountered in his nomadic life. But as he draws closer, things become clearer. Already the story has moved us from complete inability to discern from far away what it is that God is like and therefore what God demands. Now, having moved somewhat closer to God, Abraham is open to something happening that he does not expect; we will see.

The next stage of their journey is on Mt. Moriah and is marked in verse 13: *And 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.* Now we have arrived at the mountain itself, the mountain of God. The very mountain itself – a high and lofty place, perhaps shrouded in mist, likely a struggle to climb, austere and high above the normal plane where life is lived – is symbolic of our reach for God, and the Bible is full of such symbolism. But finally Abraham and Isaac have arrived at the holy place, and now Abraham sees up close. Where from a distance, living life on the plain, journeying toward but not yet having reached full insight, God seemed just like all the others. Having climbed the mountain, having struggled to reach insight, God's truer nature is exposed. God calls, and Abraham says, "Here I am," as though the nature of the encounter of God and humanity is a mutual *seeing* of each other, and then and there Abraham and Isaac worship God and the potential for violence against the boy becomes abandoned along with the distant, distorted view of God of the past. *Raah* appears once more in verse 14: *So 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."* What is it that is provided? Not a lamb for sacrifice, but a revelation, a "seeing." Not just the avoidance of murder, but the reward of spiritual struggle, a profound understanding of God's character and a deepened faith in a God who saves.

Mike Yaconelli writes, "Spirituality is not a formula; it is not a test. It is a relationship. Spirituality is not about competency; it is about intimacy. Spirituality is not about perfection; it is about connection.... Spirituality is not about being fixed; it is about God's being present in the mess of our unfixedness."

And the story of Abraham is, yes, a story of faith, but more than that, it is a story of the progress of faith, for the truth is – indeed, the profound hope is – that faith must grow, faith must expand, faith must deepen in insight, and faith must keep as its goal arriving at the confidence that God will provide, even in the face of our deepest mistakes.

Eugene Peterson may have the last word on all this: “All the persons of faith I know are sinners, doubters, uneven performers. We are secure not because we are sure of ourselves but because we trust that God is sure of us.”