

Read Genesis 22:1-14: Abraham and the near-sacrifice of Isaac

Last week, our neighbors had their annual hog roast and our family went, as has been our custom since we first moved to Danville. The neighbors have a camper. **A rite of passage for the teenage boys was to spend the night of the hog roast in the camper, so this year we told Spencer he could do that.** When Spencer came home the next morning, I asked him what they'd done. He said they talked around the campfire until midnight then did a few more things, went to sleep, then woke up around eight o'clock. **It was the phrase, "then did a few more things," that caught my attention, because I've learned the activities that don't get elaborated upon are the most interesting.** I'm still trying to figure out the few more things they did.

It is the things that are left out that interest me. I can't help but wonder if something was left out of the story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac. It's one of the most potent stories in all of literature, but so brief, with so much left unsaid.

I revisit this story because it is a powerful one, eliciting a strong reaction from those who hear it. **Barbaric, cruel, brutal, incomprehensible, intriguing.** It is all those things. Today, Isaac would be taken from Abraham and Sarah and placed in a foster home. But when reading it this week, I understood it less as a story of human sacrifice and more as a story of spiritual evolution. **I pictured Abraham straddling a line.** One side of the line represented old beliefs, the other side represented a new way of looking at something. Abraham is smack in the middle, but moving from one view to another.

Abraham lived in a time of great religious diversity, each tribe, each culture, each nation, serving their own god or gods. Abraham's god is Yahweh, who purports to be the God of all gods. **Of course, each tribe, each culture, each nation believed their god was superior.** In the god-race, there was no value in second place. Your god was first, or nothing. Those ancient people believed the value of their god was reflected in their own personal devotion and sacrifice, that great gods merited great sacrifices, and Abraham believed that too.

We use similar logic. Today, the greatest athletes merit the greatest pay. The finest artists command the highest prices. In Abraham's time, the greatest god deserved the greatest sacrifice.

Abraham loved his god. Or perhaps feared his god. **Whichever the case, Abraham felt a desperate need to give something, or someone, of great value to Yahweh so others might appreciate just how wonderful and powerful the god of Abraham was.** Abraham's greatest treasure was the very son God had given him. So that would be his gift. And while you and I recoil at the notion of human sacrifice, it had a certain logic and power in Abraham's day.

Abraham is a sincere man, and a grateful man, but like many people when it comes to religion, has lost a sense of perspective, of balance. **The moderating voice of his wife is noticeably silent.** That's another dimension left unsaid in this story.

Abraham takes his son Isaac up the mountainside and makes a camp, then builds an altar and begins to gather kindling and tinder and wood. This takes three days. On the third day, Isaac is starting to get a little suspicious.

“What are we doing here, Dad? Where's the lamb for the burnt offering?”

“God will provide,” Abraham said, then he picked up his little boy and tied him to the altar.

So here is Abraham, straddling a line, one foot in an old way of thinking about God, another foot in a new way of thinking about God. **He's got his boy laid out on the altar, and he starts thinking, "What kind of God would ask this of me? What kind of God would want this? No God I would want to worship."** So Abraham stops, unties his boy. The Bible says God told Abraham not to do it—"Do not lay your hand on the lad." But the Bible also says God told him to kill Isaac in the first place—"Go take your only child, Isaac, whom you love, and offer him as a burnt offering."

But I don't buy that. I don't buy that for a minute. **I don't think God tells people to kill their children.** I don't think God tells people to kill anyone. There have always been people who believe God does such things, some of them even wrote part of the Bible. I think what happened was this: I think Abraham climbed up that mountain believing in a God who demanded human sacrifices, and came down that mountain with a different understanding of God. **I think when Abraham was on that mountaintop he was straddling a line, one foot in an old understanding, another foot in a new understanding.** And something happened that caused him to move from one understanding to another.

I have a good friend whose house was ripped apart by a tornado this past spring. She and her husband are wonderful, kind people. **They'd worked so hard on this house, renovating it.** Just did a beautiful job, only to have it torn apart in a tornado. She wrote me, in a moment of desolation, saying, "I'm so angry at God for doing this."

But she's a smart woman, and reflective. I bet she's been giving this some thought. **And now I imagine she's straddling a line.** One foot in an old understanding about the nature of God. One foot in a new understanding of God. Maybe a bit like the prophet Elijah who discovered God wasn't in the wind, but in the still, small voice. **Maybe now she believes God wasn't in the wind, but in the many people who came to her aid.**

We climb up the mountain with one understanding, we come down the mountain with another. **Happens all the time.**

I know this couple who ten years ago were at the edge of divorce. Despised one another. Went to marriage counseling. Every week for a year. **Learned a lot about themselves, learned a lot about the other.** Some weeks felt like two steps forward and three steps back. But went up the mountain with one understanding, came down the mountain with a new understanding. **Hard, difficult climb, they said.** But worth it.

Have a family member who's been a hard fundamentalist for the past twenty years. Set in stone. Hard and fast. All black and white. No grey. Everything was, "Thus saith the Lord." **Whenever I was around him, I had the impression I was being judged and found wanting.** Maybe he didn't think bad about me at all. But that's how I felt around him. I love him. He's in my family. But the relationship wasn't as warm as it could have been. A few months ago, I stopped by his house to visit. **He was sitting in his backyard reading Eckhart Tolle's book, A New Earth.** He looks up from the book, smiles, and says, "This book is changing my life." And it has. He went up the mountain with one mindset, came back down with another.

What do you think about God? What would it take to change your mind?

What do you think about that family member you deeply resent or don't understand? What would it take to change your perspective?

Or let me ask it this way and leave you with this. Do you allow for the possibility of change and growth in your life? Do you believe you can climb up a mountain seeing life one way, and come back down seeing it another?