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Genesis 22:1-14

Salem, Bridgeport

“Here We Are”

We’re probably all familiar with this story
known by Christians as “the sacrifice of Isaac” and by Jews as “the binding of Isaac”.

Back in the time of Abraham, child sacrifice was certainly practiced,
both in the surrounding cultures and probably among Abraham’s people as well,
which is why prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel spoke out against it.¹

So in its earliest stage,
this story could simply be an etiological tale about the shift from human to animal sacrifice.

But as with every great story, there are many more layers to explore.
For Jews, the story became inextricably connected with worship in the Temple.
Why? Because the name Moriah is only used twice in the Bible,
as the place of the binding of Isaac and the place where Solomon built the Temple.
Back in 2000 when I traveled to Israel, I was able to enter what is now the Dome of the Rock,
and see the actual rock.

It was the place where Abraham went to sacrifice Isaac, where God provided a ram instead,
and where animal sacrifices were carried out later in the Temple that was built there.

For Christians, the story of Abraham being willing to sacrifice his only son, Isaac,
is seen both as a foreshadowing of the story of God sacrificing his only son, Jesus,
and as a model of faith and obedience for us all.

The story is far too rich for its depths to be plumbed in a short sermon,
so I want to look at just a few aspects of it.

The first is that when God calls Abram, Abram responds by saying “*Here I am*”.

Now in Hebrew there are two ways of saying this:

The first is “poh”, which would be used as a response to a roll call, or just a general “here I am in the sanctuary”;
the second is the word used here in our text, “hineni”,

which has a more complete, deeper meaning² –

as in “I’m listening”, “I’m paying attention”, “I’m here for you”, or “I’m with you”.

So already in this initial response to God’s call,

Abraham is already signifying his openness to what God may have in mind.

The second is that the story begins, “*After these things...*”, so we need to take a brief look back on what came before.

When Abraham was 75 years old, God called him to pick up and go on a journey, destination unknown,
and promised that he would have a multitude of descendants.

After waiting 10 years for that promise to be fulfilled, Sarah decides she had better help God along
and gives her maid Hagar to Abraham, and he has a son with her, at age 86.

God again promises to bless Abraham and Sarah with their own son
and 13 years later, when Abraham is 99, Isaac is born.

So now, Abraham has 2 sons, which becomes 1 too many for Sarah, so at her insistence and with great sorrow,
Abraham casts out his son, Ishmael, and his mother.

And it is after this that God demands of Abraham the most awful thing imaginable:

“*Take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah
and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I will show you*” (22:2).

The rabbis imagine it something like this:

God says, “Take your son”, and Abraham responds, “I have two sons”.

God answers him, “Your only son” and Abraham says, “Each is the only son of his mother”.

God says, “The one whom you love” and Abraham replies that he loves both.

And then God says: “Isaac.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The story continues with Abraham and Isaac walking together for three days.

Then *“Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac.”*

“Isaac said to Abraham his father, ‘My father!’ and he said, ‘Here I am, my son’” (22:7).

The same word of attention Abraham had given to God, he now gives to Isaac.

When they had reached the place of sacrifice and Abraham had built an altar

“He bound his son Isaac.... Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son” (22:9-10).

At that moment God interrupts with great urgency, *“Abraham! Abraham!”*

And Abraham replies for the third and final time in the story, and no doubt with unbelievable relief, *“Here I am”*.

Why did God put Abraham through such a test?

Perhaps because God has called Abraham to a position of great responsibility and needs to know he is up for the task.

The fact is, Abraham had failed numerous times in the past, giving his wife over for Pharaoh’s sexual pleasure in order to save his own skin, trying to help God do God’s job by using Hagar instead of waiting for God to bless Sarah, sending Hagar and his son Ishmael out into the desert alone to probable death, to name just a few of his awful deeds.

There was certainly reason for God to question Abraham’s faith and commitment.

So here, in this story, we hear that God gives Abraham another chance, another test.

The story, of course, is about more than Abraham’s life, it is about yours and mine, and ours.

God has called us as God called Abraham and each one of us here has replied, *“Here I am”*.

Like Abraham, we are constantly tested by the choices and challenges of our lives.

Will we be asked to sacrifice our only child? Probably not.

Big tests like that may confront us, of course, but thank God they are usually few and far between.

But there are little tests that confront us all of the time,

and one of the things we can do together is to learn to spot the actual choices and challenges we have that so often lie disguised in the habits and routines and automatic responses of our everyday lives.

Most of these choices are so small that we don’t even recognize them as such –

do I drink that soda I crave, or treat my body as God’s temple?

do I complain about someone who annoys me, or do I focus on their gifts and strengths?

am I resentful that I don’t have all I want, or am I grateful for all my blessings?

do I just go through the motions of living a Christian life,

or am I open to the new things that God may have in mind for me?

Each of these choices is small in and of themselves,

but it is the little things that become patterns that end up being the very fabric of our lives.

The first challenge is to spot these ways in which God calls us to abundant life,

and the second challenge is to follow where God leads.

Will we fail? Of course.

But as God gave Abraham another chance, so God gives us another chance – every moment of every day.

This story of the Testing of Abraham makes a claim on us:

All that we have, even our own lives and those of the ones most dear to us,

belong ultimately to God, who gave them to us in the first place.

This story assures us that when we say *“Here we are”* to God, what we discover is that God is here for us.

Thanks be to God! **Amen**

ⁱ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3279,

Commentary on Genesis 22:1-14, Kathryn M. Schifferdecker

ⁱⁱ <http://www.leonardcohenforum.com/viewtopic.php?t=36737>

ⁱⁱⁱ Op. Cit., http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3279,