

09/17/2017 – Narrative Lectionary Yr 4-2

“Bound by Command, Unbound by Life” – Rev. Seth D. Jones

Scripture: Gen 21:1-3, 22:1-14

Our story today has thousands of years of interpretation, commentary, and discussion. It is at once one of the most popular of all Bible stories, and at the same time one of the most difficult of any story in Scripture.

When we were at Colonial Church of Edina, our pastor there, Rev. Dr. David Fisher, had one of his close rabbi friends come in and do a morning lecture on Abraham and Isaac. The Jewish tradition calls this story *The Akedah*, or The Binding of Isaac. The lecturer presented several different views on the story and then took questions. My question was,

“Has this story always generated difficulty and shock, or was there a time it would have been ‘accepted’?”

The rabbi answered definitively that, as long as there have been rabbis and teachers of Scripture, the Akedah has been difficult, open to interpretation, and always shocking.

There is no point in time in the Jewish faith where a story about a father attempting to sacrifice a child would not have been incredibly shocking.

Think about Abraham for a moment. Aside from this incident, and it is a big incident, Abraham is known as The Ethical Founder of the Faith. Abraham argues for the people of God in several places. He is willing to challenge God at Sodom and Gomorrah, he questions the angels about the birth of Isaac. But here? Abraham asks no questions. Abraham does not challenge God.

Think about his relationship with Isaac following this story. At no point in Scripture following this story do Abraham and Isaac ever speak again. The next time Isaac sees Abraham is when Isaac and his brother, Ishmael, bury their father.

Only once after the near-sacrifice on the mountain does Isaac use Abraham’s name, when Isaac transfers the blessing and inheritance which Isaac received from Abraham to Jacob, thinking Jacob is Esau. Some commentators refer to this story today as The Betrayal of Isaac, and they have an excellent point.

If you are disturbed by this story, you should be.

It is deeply disturbing, and I believe it is intended to be disturbing. The temptation here is, since we are talking throughout the coming year about God’s giving and provision, is to skip over all this difficulty and talk about how God provides a ram for the sacrifice rather than Isaac. We might try to defend God and Abraham and point to verse 22:5, where God says, according to the King James version:

⁵And Abraham said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you.

See! We will say. Abraham knows that he and the boy are both coming back!

The story allows us to project wildly, to try to get to the story behind the story. But we must still go through the next verses:

⁹*And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. ¹⁰And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.*

Caravaggio, the artist who painted the cover of our bulletin, catches the fear and the trauma of this Biblical landmark very well. The horror in Isaac's eyes is a valid response to what is happening. Isaac is now marked by this event for the rest of his life. It is likely the formative moment of his entire development.

And then,

¹¹*And the angel of the LORD called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I.*

¹²*And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him:*

for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me.

¹³*And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son.*

The presence of the Provision of God, the ram, allows for Isaac to be unbound. But this experience is one of trauma, of pain. The body and the mind perceive the anticipation of suffering and death in much the same way as if it had occurred in actuality.

This is why, while the test is Abraham's to go through – after all, the story begins with *And so it came to pass that God tested Abraham* – it is Isaac that must live through the experience and go on after the experience. That is why Isaac is the most interesting character to me in this story and what follows.

Which is not to say this wasn't difficult for Abraham as well. He has no good options, does he?

Disobey the God who has provided all things for me, or sacrifice the son the Lord has given me. Break my relationship with my God, or destroy my relationship with my son? How are those good choices?

Take a moment to reflect on traumas and horrible things you have faced, that you have felt you had to do, like Abraham, or that were done to you, like Isaac. How did you come to be here today? Are you still bound to the experience, bound to the things others felt they had to do, haunted by the trauma of that past?

How do you deal with it?

Are you unbound from the experience by the things that life has brought your way since then? Are both true at the same time, the binding and the unbinding of the pain, the suffering, the trauma of the past?

Or perhaps you are being bound to the altar right now.

The quality that allows one to continue on and build a life after trauma and suffering is called *resilience*. Resilience is hard-wired right into Creation itself. Resilience is part of the creative, relational, good ways in which God allows things to change and transform.

I want to be clear, though, about what *resilience* is not. Resilience is **not** ‘*bouncing back*’ or ‘*getting over*’ things. There is no place in Scripture that says, “*Just get over it*”, or “*the past is the past*”, or “*you should just move on from that*”.

In May of 1980, the largest volcanic eruption in American history took place with the explosion of Mt. St. Helen’s in Washington state. The destruction was massive. The resulting earthquake caused the largest landslide in recorded history as the north face of the mountain sloughed off. Pyroclastic flows of lava and mud pressed out to 23 miles beyond the volcano. Lakes were vaporized as superheated material fell into them and boiled them. The explosions were heard all the way into Montana. 230 square miles of forest were leveled.¹ I remember seeing the skies clouded with ash all the way in Wisconsin days later.

In the following weeks, scientists and botanists spoke of how the destruction was permanent and the flora and fauna of the immediate site and the surrounding areas would not return. No one was more surprised than those scientists, though, when, within months, the flora and fauna of the area came back quickly and powerfully. The landscape was radically altered, and still is, but life found a way to come back. The same plants, trees, flowers, animals all returned, but they grew back and related to one another differently than before the volcano.

Nature, after a disaster, does not forget. Nature, Creation, does not ‘*just get over it*’. The past trauma becomes the formative element of whatever goes forward. That is the quality of resilience. Resilience is not a thing that can be understood or known without a prior trauma or separation. While Mt. St. Helen’s is beautiful and lush now, it is essential to remember that its beauty and lushness are rooted in the destruction and trauma of the eruption.

This is why Isaac is, for me, the Biblical image of resilience. Isaac’s life following this moment on the mountain is defined by his experience there with Abraham. Isaac is perceived historically as merely a place-holder in the story who gets us from Creation through Noah to Abraham and to the establishment of Israel by way of Isaac’s son, Jacob. He doesn’t do much to advance the cause, such as it is, and the things Isaac does bear the mark of what his father, Abraham, also did. Isaac’s life carries the shadow of his father, Abraham.

If I were to write a novel about Isaac, I would spend a lot of time examining how Isaac was still bound by his near-sacrifice on the mountain. I would wonder how the explosive landslide of trust undermined his ability to extend deeply into the greater world. I would wonder how the pyroclastic flow of conflicting emotions would overwhelm him at times, limiting his discernment and ability to look ahead.

I would write about how his life was formed and defined by the destruction and deconstruction on the altar on the mountain. The ties that bind us to the past are often very strong. The area of leveled forests and ruined landscape can be vast with events like this.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1980_eruption_of_Mount_St._Helens

Elie Wiesel, who died last July, held up Isaac as his favorite character in Scripture. He believed, like I do, that Isaac was an example of resilience. Wiesel says of Isaac,

“He is alone. On the verge of despair. And yet he does not give up. On the contrary, he strives to find a place among the living.”²

Elie Wiesel was a survivor of the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Buchenwald. Wiesel never ‘got over’ or ‘let the past be the past’ or ‘let go and let God’ because for Wiesel to do so would be an insult to the memory of all who had died in the camps. Instead, Wiesel became a modern image of resilience, with Isaac as his model for how to do it.

Wiesel went forward with his life with Auschwitz and Buchenwald as the ash and rock and mud out of which his life beyond the Nazis was built.

In my novel about Isaac, I would deeply examine the destroyed landscape of the Mountain of Morah etched into Isaac’s soul. But what I would also examine is the unbinding of Isaac, the resilience of his life built on the destroyed mountainside.

Because Isaac also marries. He has children. He maintains, preserves, and then passes on Abraham’s inheritance to his son. Isaac provides. Isaac provides because God provides.

See, God’s provision is not at the expense of the trauma and the suffering we have experienced. In many ways, it is, as Soren Kierkegaard says of this story, the height of absurdity to have faith in a God who may call us to things which leave a trail of destruction in their path. The human approach to the desires of God may mess a lot of things up. But God provides.

When Jesus walks alongside the disciples on the Road to Emmaus (Luke 24), he does not disavow the disciples their suffering and pain at the death of Jesus on the Cross. What Jesus does do is help them understand what is happening in the greater story of God’s Creation and Provision.

The Resurrection becomes the reference point of the resilience we were created to experience. In the midst of death and despair, the one who has brutally died walks alongside those who mourn and grieve. It is only in the sharing of bread, in the breaking of God’s provision in the simplest of ways, that the disciples recognize the Resurrected Christ. The warming of the disciples’ hearts happens not in spite of their despair and horror, but on it, through it, even because of it. Their resilience is built on the Cross of Christ, who comes to them in Resurrection.

The Binding of Isaac is a story that defines Isaac and also Abraham. But it also defines us, because in it we see that our relationships, the things we do, the problems we have, the traumas we face and the suffering we have caused do not diminish the things God provides.

Those traumas, those sufferings, those things we have done and have had done to us do not go away. Sometimes, like here in Genesis 22, they are the material upon which we build an entire life.

When the Binding and Unbinding of Isaac is all done, Abraham names the place on Mount Morah “God Will Provide”, or “In the Mount of the Lord It Shall Be Seen”.

What has God provided here?

² From a sermon by Rabbi Aaron Finkelstein, entitled *Isaac’s Resilience*, preached on Rosh Hashanah, 5777.

For Abraham, God has provided a ram for sacrifice rather than his son, Isaac. But for Isaac, God has provided the foundation of a life lived forward through, because of, and with what has happened in this place. God *sees*, and God provides.

One last note about resilience. It is not insignificant that Isaac's name means, *He Laughs*. In the ashes of great suffering, great pain and loss, great trauma, God provides laughter as the path to resilience. Elie Wiesel was known for many things in his life.

His writings were powerful, wrenching, and deep in their evocation of suffering, loss, trauma, and memory. But what his friends remember most about him was his sense of humor. As Rabbi Aaron Finkelstein quotes in his Rosh Hashanah sermon about today's reading,

So let us return Wiesel's opening question about the binding of Isaac: "Why was the most tragic of our ancestors named Isaac, a name which evokes and signifies laughter? Here is why. As the first survivor, he had to teach us, the future survivors of Jewish history, that it is possible to suffer and despair an entire lifetime and still not give up the art of laughter." It is Isaac's resilience, encoded in his name and his life that should inspire us and help us in the year to come. Or as Wiesel observed, "suffering gives man no privileges; it all depends on what he does with it."³

Be resilient. Remember our brother, Isaac, and go forth into your God-given lives, knowing that God provides and that God loves you.
Amen.

³ Ibid.