

**Sept. 17, 2017**  
**Gen 22: 1-15 Ps 12 John 1:6-15 “Searching for the Thread”**

The Genesis story of Abraham and Isaac is a story of our faith's beginnings, and as such located in a very different time and culture from our own. It speaks of an ancient time and place when Abraham, known as the father of our faith, first looked out at the stars and laid hold of the conviction that God was not many, but one.

This story told of the earliest of days for the people who would later become known as the Hebrews—and later still simply as Israel, as they gradually move towards a deeper and more profound understanding of the nature of God as One.

While it was common practice amongst some of ancient cultures and religions of the region in that time to make human sacrifice to placate their gods; amongst the ancient Hebrews, the sacrifice of one's children was not considered acceptable. Indeed, it is said, that this story may be indicative of a great historical turning point in this regard. (Generally speaking, this change is considered good news amongst children!)

As time passed, this was one of the things that differentiated the ancient Hebrews from their neighbours. Eventually, of course, we came to hear of the 'dedication' of their first born to God--as a living being-- a sacrifice of a different nature altogether. Much later, of course, Paul, in his letter to the Romans, would speak of the offering of our own lives as living sacrifices to God.

Even so, earlier this week, I sent a note to a couple of colleagues saying .... “YIKES! WHAT ON EARTH ARE YOU DOING WITH THE STORY OF THE BINDING OF ISAAC?”

I was freshly horrified in the reading of it! What kind of God can we be talking about here? What kind of God is Abraham worshipping? Is it the same God we worship today? Who changed?

Can you imagine, laying the wood for your son's funeral pyre upon his young back and then asking him to carry it up the mountain, knowing that upon reaching your destination, you are to slay him and make of him a sacrificial offering!!! What kind of God would ask for such a proof of faithfulness and trust?

If we were to catch wind of a story like this today, the father would surely be arrested, put under psychological observation, and the child taken into protective custody!

Even if we knew that Abraham's hand would be stayed, and no physical harm would come to the child, we would think about the psychological trauma to poor Isaac, as he carries within him the memory of his beloved father lifting his arm, knife in hand, ready to pierce his tender heart.

This is the precious child of promise whose conception was greeted with dis-belief, and whose birth was met with wildest joy and laughter. This is the child whose name, Isaac, means laughter.

Where is the joy, where is the joke, where is the laughter in this story?

Some argue that perhaps Isaac himself, knew of this practice in the cultures surrounding them, and was prepared, even honoured, to offer his life in this way.

Perhaps young Isaac was a willing participant! How else, they ask, would this 100+year old father bind an unwilling teenager?

Again, I can only repeat, “Call 911! Get the police! Call in Children's Aid. Cuff the father and lock him up! The child is clearly under the influence of a dangerous cult!”

The story seems crazy! If this son is to be slain, from whom will all those offspring to out-number the stars come? .... For that is what Abraham has been promised.

Much later, in the New Testament, we are told we are children of Abraham through faith! We are the children numbering the stars. But, according to the story, Isaac was Abraham and Sarah's real flesh and blood child... not some spiritual descendent!

So, I have to ask what and where is the thread here? What and where is the thread that can carry us through such dark and dangerous stories? And why has this story been allowed to stand as sacred scripture? What does it have to teach us?

Some argue that the moment at which Abraham's knife-wielding hand is stayed above the bound and trembling body of his beloved son, called laughter, is a moment of Divine revelation. With the angel's shout of, “Abraham, Abraham... Do not lay a hand on the boy,” it becomes clear that this kind of sacrifice is not to be the way of this God's people.

It also becomes clear, and likely most would say this is the real point of the story, that Abraham will do anything to prove himself faithful to this God in whom he trusts.

In my humble opinion, these revelations come about three days too late!...

Yes, do note the three-day time frame between the intended sacrificial death of Isaac (as a test of Abraham's faith!)... and the the-skin-of-his-teeth reprieve of Isaac from that fate.

Yes, do consider this story in light of the traditional doctrine of the western church known as the sacrificial atonement—a doctrine seeming to infer that God needs a perfect sacrifice in order to forgive us our sins. Really? I ask again, "What kind of God do we claim to worship?"

"Does not this strange but familiar doctrine challenge everything we know of human love, grace, forgiveness and healing relationship?"

Do you not think it strange that the Angel of God stops the hand of Abraham above the body of the bound Isaac, yet does not stop the hand of the Roman guards binding the hands of Jesus to a Roman cross?

Okay, I know I'm getting into deep and murky waters here! But, consider this. Between the generations of Abraham and of Jesus of Nazareth, lives a prophet of ancient Israel, by the name of Micah who cries out these words,

"With what shall I come before the Lord, ...?  
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,  
with calves a year old?

<sup>7</sup> Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?  
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

<sup>8</sup> God has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?

Consider these words. Then, allow yourself to wonder about a doctrine that says that Jesus died that our sins might be forgiven. Just what kind of God do we claim to worship here? In a moment of deep grief and remembrance, poet, Parker Palmer wrote these words:

... He was far too young  
to die and I too young to watch my world unravel  
as it did. I grieved my loss, our loss, then started  
to reweave—a work, a life, a world—not knowing  
then what I know now: the world unravels always,  
and it must be rewoven time and time again.

You must keep collecting threads—threads of meaning,  
threads of hope, threads of purpose, energy and will—

... You must keep on weaving—stopping sometimes only  
to repair your broken loom—weave a cloak of warmth  
and light against the dark and cold, a cloak in which  
to wrap whoever comes to you in need—the world  
with all its suffering, those near at hand, yourself.

And, if you are lucky, you will find along the way  
the thread with which you can reweave your own  
tattered life, the thread that more than any other  
laces us with warmth and light, making both the  
weaver and the weaving true—the red thread  
they call Love, the thread you hold, then  
hand along, saying to another, "You."

There is a thread I try to follow, a thread I do my best to hold onto and pass on, a thread working to make both the weaver and weaving true. In matters of faith, and belief, we cannot afford to be naïve, for they shape our very lives.

We cannot simply accept what we have been told, regardless of who has said them or how long they have been said. When our hearts and minds cry out against some supposed 'sacred truth' or other, we need to know which threads to hold onto, which threads will weave what matters into a life of meaning and good purpose—and which threads must be allowed to catch the wind and fly away.

For me, the sacred thread is: love, compassion, or, as both the Hebrew and Buddhist traditions phrase it, Loving-kindness. If a belief, teaching, story, or doctrine does not reveal a God of loving-kindness—if it does not call us to lives of compassion and good purpose, we must not continue to blindly weave it into the fabric of our lives or of our faith!

As Jesus once said, "You cannot put new wine into old wineskins!"

Like Jacob with his angel, we must wrestle our beliefs, stories, and doctrines until daybreak, when we will surely receive from them a blessing!

So, let us be curious, open, honest, and courageous-- ready to argue with this one we call God, ready to challenge those things we have been told--and let us listen deeply for the inner voice that speaks soul-truths ringing with the harmony of goodness and of life.

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