

Magnolia UCC
July 2, 2017

Reading: Genesis 22: 1-14

Lector: 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...

Michael: Excuse me. But may I interrupt for a moment?

Lector: Um, ok. *(she closes her book and sits down)*

Michael: What do we do when we disagree with the Bible? We are blessed in the UCC with affirmation of our inquiring nature. In our loving communities of faith, we are encouraged to express our doubts, ask our questions, and hold sacred space for each other as we explore our personal relationships with God. I did a lot of exploring when I was at seminary.

When I was accepted to the Pacific School of Religion, I was so excited I threatened to stand on the lawn outside Benton Hall Dormitory until they gave me the keys to my room. It was April. Classes started in September. Marge, the Housing Coordinator, told me to go home. Well, preparation is my middle name. I felt I needed to do something in preparation for this theological adventure. But, they hadn't even given me a reading list! Then it occurred to me: I could read the Bible! I even have one that is arranged

chronologically so it might actually make sense. Interestingly enough, at the same time I also started reading "When God Was a Woman" by Merlin Stone.

Reading those two texts together gave me two very different points of view. By the time September rolled around, I so much wanted to march into a Bible study class, slam down the Bible and ask "Have you read this thing??!" Looking at the text through a feminist and liberal lens, I had noticed some very disturbing things.

Did you know that "the promised land" the "land of milk and honey" that God promised to the nation lead by Moses – was already inhabited? People lived in Canaan, but God said "that's ok, kill them all, wipe out their cities and build your own homes." He did! Numbers 33:51-53 *The Lord spoke to Moses... Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you pass over the Jordan into the land of Canaan, then you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you and destroy all their figured stones and destroy all their metal images and demolish all their high places. And you shall take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have given the land to you to possess it."*

What I found so disturbing was how literal interpretations of this story had given rise to the concept of Manifest Destiny. *Manifest Destiny* is a term for the attitude prevalent during the 19th century period of American expansion that the United States not only could, but was destined to, stretch from coast to coast. In 1845, a democratic leader and influential editor by the name of John L. O'Sullivan gave the movement its name. In an attempt to explain America's thirst for expansion, and to present a defense for America's claim to new territories he wrote: *the right of our manifest destiny to over spread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us...*

This attitude justified western settlement which meant they passed over the Atlantic sea and drove out all the inhabitants of the land before them, they destroyed sacred burial grounds, they destroyed herds of buffalo, they demolished the beloved families and drove them from the land. They took possession of lands that had been home to the Native Americans who had lived here long before the White man arrived.

Bible texts have been used to justify slavery: Titus 2:9-10 *Slaves are to be submissive to their own masters in everything; they are to be well-pleasing, not argumentative, not pilfering, but showing all good faith, so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior.*

Not to mention how the Gospel of Matthew has been used to fuel horrific anti-Semitism. Matthew 27:24-25: *When Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see to it yourselves. And all the people answered, "His blood be on us, and on our children."*

And don't get me started on Adam and Eve! Genesis 1:27 *"So God created man in his own image..."*

Then there is the story we are focusing on today: The Sacrifice of Isaac. This story of a father willing to kill his beloved son has most famously been used to as interpretation and validation of the sacrifice of Jesus demanded by God, His Father. Abraham is commanded to sacrifice his most beloved child! I have to ask: Would it not have been better if the story we hold as the highest example of obedience to God had been a story of the protection of the most beloved child?

These ancient stories can be hard to work with. Our quest to understand the Bible, to hear what God, the prophets, and Jesus had to say, is a fascinating and frustrating process. One way to go about this quest is to view the story from different points of view. Don't just take it all at face value; ask questions. Look at the time and space between the words. Look at who speaks and who is silent. Who is present and who is not even there. Who heard this story, and most interesting of questions, who told this story? We have here a story filled with emotions and questions. We have the story of a father who listens to God and obeys, even when what is asked of him is impossible to imagine. Who told this story? One who is deeply affected by this story but who is given no voice, no image, no presence, is Isaac's mother, Sarah.

These families were very close knit. Sarah might have risen in the morning to prepare the morning meal – and found Isaac and Abraham missing! Did she go about her morning tasks and simply check in with other members of the community to see if anyone had seen her two men? They were gone for at least 6 days! Sarah must have been very worried! After 6 or 7 long days and nights, a friend calls out that they see Abraham and Isaac returning! Sarah runs to the entrance of their home to stare down the path. *(Sarah comes up on the chancel looking out down the center aisle)* At last, she sees his dear face! *(Isaac comes up center aisle on Sarah's first line. Drama enacted.)*

Sarah stands on the chancel, hands on her hips and calls out to her son:

Sarah: Where have you been??

Isaac: *(running in, goes to hug his mother)* Ima! Mother! *(they hug)* I am so glad to be home with you at last!

Sarah: You disappeared! You have been gone for seven days!! Where have you been?

Isaac: Father, Abba took me to a mountain far away. He told me God had spoken to him.

Sarah: He told you God had commanded him to go?

Isaac: Yes, Ima. Abba told me God said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, to one of the mountains that I shall show you."

Sarah: I did not hear you leave!

Isaac: It was early in the morning. Abba saddled his donkey and took two of our young men with him. He cut the wood for the burnt offering, and we left very quietly.

Sarah: And you and the young men did not ask him where you were going?

Isaac: Ima, you know Father doesn't like to be questioned.

Sarah: This is true, my son.

Isaac: On the third day, Abba looked up and saw the place far away.

Sarah: How did he know? Did he say anything to you about this place?

Isaac: No. He just smiled. Then he said to the young men, "stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there."

Sarah: "The boy"??

Isaac: He meant me.

Sarah: Ah.

Isaac: And he said, "we will worship, and then we will come back to you." But then Abba took the wood for the burnt offering and laid it in my arms.

Sarah: That is only right, my son. You are old enough now to carry the elements for the sacrifice. What did your father carry?

Isaac: Abba carried the fire and the knife.

Sarah: That is right, as it should be. You two walked on alone?

Isaac: Yes. We did not have to walk very far. We came to a quiet, sheltered place on the mountain. Abba said that God had shown him the place.

Sarah: Yes, Abraham talks with God often. What did you do when you stopped?

Isaac: Abba built an altar there and laid the wood in a pattern on a large flat stone. Then he turned to me.

Sarah: I am afraid of what you will tell me next.

Isaac: Abba had ropes in his hand. I knew what he wanted to do with me, but his eyes were sad.

Sarah: You are his son, his only true son, the son he loves most dearly.

Isaac: I know Ima. That is why I let him hold both my hands in his.

Sarah: He bound you, and laid you on the altar...

Isaac: ...on top of the wood.

Sarah: Oh my child! Were you frightened?

Isaac: I was sad.

Sarah: Yes.

Isaac: And I was curious.

Sarah: Curious?

Isaac: Yes, Ima. Curious. Abba has always told me how God had promised him a son. And when I was born... my name...

Sarah: We named you Isaac. We named you Laughter.

Isaac: Yes! I couldn't believe that this God who loves you and Abba so much, would ask him to take my life. So, I was curious.

Sarah: But Abraham held the knife. He reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his beloved son.

Isaac: Yes, Ima. I looked up at Abba from my pile of sticks. I wanted to tell him I was ready.

Sarah: But the Angel of the Lord called to him from heaven.

Isaac: Yes!! How did you know?

Sarah: My son. You are here with me now. And as you know, God talks to Abraham all the time. Only God could have stopped his hand. Could you hear the Lord speak?

Isaac: Yes, Ima. I heard God say, "Abraham, Abraham!"

Sarah: And Abraham said, "Here I am."

Isaac: And God 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.

Sarah: O Isaac. You were so brave!

Isaac: I was so scared! But when I heard the voice of God... I laughed.

Sarah: You laughed??

Isaac: What else could I do? Abba held the knife above my heart.

Sarah: And you laughed!

Isaac: I laughed because Abba had told me that God would provide for the sacrifice. I thought it was to be me. But then Abba saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns.

Sarah: And he went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead you.

Isaac: Yes. Before we left, Abba poured some oil on the great stone. He said a prayer and he named that place, "The Lord will provide."

Sarah: And so it shall be said from this day forward: "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided." For the Lord has brought you home to me.

Isaac: Thanks be to God.

Sarah: Amen.

(Sarah and Isaac return to their seats.)

Amen indeed. Looking at the story from this alternative view, and looking at many other Biblical stories, I finally noticed something different. When we back up a bit, and look at all the stories in the Bible – a pattern emerges. Promises are made, promises are broken, apology and forgiveness heal the hurts, so fresh promises can be made. Promises made, promises broken, apology & forgiveness, promises made. If we have the strength and persistence to live through this process, our relationships are strengthened.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, Israel is repeatedly blessed by God. The people promise to love and honor, and then they wander off and worship a golden calf. God gets angry, making them wander in the wilderness for 40 years. But then the people repent, God forgives, and a new covenant is promised.

In the New Testament, Jesus repeatedly teaches and explains and guides. The disciples don't get it. They turn to him and ask "who among us is greatest?" Jesus gets upset: *O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you?* (Mark 9:19) And he stalks away from them going up on the mountain to pray... praying for patience? Then the disciples and the people find him, and Jesus turns and feeds 5,000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish.

When we look at these expansive, mythical, meaningful stories from different points of view, we can then look at the life of Jesus within that new vision. The cycle is here too. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus can be seen as the ultimate enactment of this cycle. His life is the story of God's promise to show us the way. His death seems like betrayal of all he stood for. His resurrection teaches us that death is not the end of the story. And he stands in his risen glory and promises: *And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.* (Matthew 28:20) The story of Jesus affirms that love is stronger than hate. If we are courageous enough to keep our hearts open, our relationship with God always comes back to promises made and love embodied.

Paul sums it up nicely. Romans 8:38-39 *For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.* Nothing can separate you from the Love of God. That is a promise. And the people said: Amen