

What Kind of God Do We Worship?

I once heard a sermon in which the preacher spent the first half of his time apologizing for the biblical text, apologizing for how offensive the text might sound to its listeners gathered in the congregation that day. He spent the rest of his time explaining away what seemed like the plain meaning of the text, again, it seemed to me, in an effort to make it more palatable for his listeners. Like mashing up solid food to make it into baby food, or the proverbial 'spoonful of sugar' to help the medicine go down.

If ever a text cried out for an apology or disclaimer, or to be explained away or sugar-coated in some way, it's probably the one we hear David read today from the book of Genesis: the sacrifice, or rather near sacrifice, of Isaac. But I am going to do neither: I'm not going to apologize for the text, for the ways that it might offend our sensibilities. And I'm not going to mush it up, explain it away, to make us all feel better.

Sometimes what we need to do is just encounter the strangeness of the text, the offensiveness of the Bible, and not try to resolve it, to make it safe for our consumption. Because sometimes the Bible doesn't want to be tasty, or attractive to us. Sometimes the Bible

doesn't come to us as a warm fuzzy, or as an affirmation of our particular likes and dislikes. Sometimes the Bible speaks a word of judgement to us; sometimes it tells us things we don't want to hear; sometimes it tells us truths we don't want to hear.

Now in all these things we trust that even when the Bible is offensive to us, even when we don't like the taste of it, the message of Scripture is still good for us, it is still medicine for our souls, even when it tastes awful.

If we insist on controlling the message of the Bible, manipulating it so that it tastes good to us, or avoiding parts that leave a sour taste, then we'll miss out on a lot of the good medicine it contains. So sometimes we need to encounter this strangeness and offensiveness, and to wonder what it reveals about God, what good medicine or good news it has for us.

Having said all that, I do appreciate that this story may have a particular resonance for those who have experienced childhood abuse, or abuse at the hand of a parent. I am a survivor of childhood abuse, and if this story raises concerns or questions for you, know that I will be available to speak with you afterwards.

This story is indeed a heart wrenching one, and that seems to be intentional, given the way the story is told. Abraham and Sarah had been promised a son and heir, through whom God would make a multitude of descendants. Abraham was a hundred years old when Isaac was born. Isaac was a living miracle, and a slender thread from which God's promised future was suspended.

God calls to Abraham, and he responds, "Here I am." And God commands Abraham to take the life of his son, his only son, the son whom he loves; to sever the slender thread from which the future hung. And Abraham goes, as he has gone before, in obedience to God's commands. On the way, Isaac calls to his father, and Abraham responds, "Here I am."

It's an echo of his response to God, and a sign perhaps of Abraham's deep attentiveness. We wonder Abraham must have been thinking through all of this, but perhaps he isn't thinking at all, because thinking about it would have been too awful. Instead he is being attentive to the calls he hears—from his God and from his beloved son—and just putting one foot in front of the other in trusting obedience.

Abraham makes all of the preparations, and as the awful deed is about to be completed, he hears a third call, from an angel. Again he responds in exactly the same way, "Here I am." He is told to not lay a hand on his son, and a ram is provided for the sacrifice.

Isaac is spared, and the promised future remains possible. Phew!

We often come away from this story judging God: what kind of God would ask such a thing? Abraham doesn't come off much better in our judgement: what kind of father would do so such a thing? We're offended, understandably. But this is where it's helpful to remember the difference between us and God, between God's ways and our ways.

We want to fashion God in our image; to make a God who always affirms and blesses our choices. But this story is a reminder of God's sovereign refusal to fit within the box we make for God. This story reminds us that it is God who makes us, who gives us everything we have—our very breath—and who out of love created an entire universe. This story asserts that it is this God alone who has the right to commandeer our lives, to call us into obedient and costly service, loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength—with everything we've got, everything we've been given.

The last line of the story reminds us of perhaps the central point of the story: "the Lord will provide." In the end, the story of the near sacrifice of Isaac is a story of God's gracious provision. Abraham, obedient and attentive, discovers that God is not a God of death but of life, as Isaac is spared and the promised future is affirmed. We may wish it could have happened another way: why would God put Abraham through all that? But then

we're back to making a God who makes sense to us, instead of encountering the God who is; the God who is sometimes maddeningly inscrutable to us.

Abraham trusted God, and walked step by step in that trust, not letting his mind race ahead to what would happen next, and how it would all end, and what he would do when they got to where they were going. We call this deep trust of God faith, and it's this trust or faith that enables us to respond to God's calling, even when God's call seems perplexing or unwelcome or inconvenient to us.

Over and over again, God called Abraham to relinquish control of his life, his home, his family, his destiny, and to trust in the promises of God, even when that seemed like a very strange thing to do. Over and over again, God provided.

Centuries later, God in Jesus called his disciples to the same kind of trust and faith. Jesus called them, and calls us, to do the strangest things: to love our enemies, to befriend the unlovely, to give everything we have to those in need, to stand with the suffering and the marginalized, and to join our voices to their cries for justice. These may seem like impossible demands to make of us, overwhelmingly costly, or at the very least, deeply inconvenient.

This too is part of the Bible that we may not want to hear.

Until we remember the cross, and how God in Jesus paid the ultimate cost, suffering and dying on behalf of the poor and the marginalized and the criminal, for our sakes, and for the sake of the world. In the cross, God in Jesus goes to every place God calls us to go, and then even beyond—to death, to hell and back.

God's resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the ultimate sign of the strangeness, the wildness of God. What kind of God would raise crucified Jesus from the dead? A God bigger than our boxes, inscrutable and unpalatable, a God who is the master of life and death, and ultimately a God of life, and life abundant, not only for us but for everyone.

This is Good News for us because it means that God is with us wherever we go, that God joins us in every venture God calls us to, and that God indeed will provide.

I'll close with a prayer by Will Willimon. Let us pray:

Gracious and loving God, you have come to us in the person of Jesus the Christ. Jesus came to us, reached out to us, called us to be his disciples and venture forth with him toward God's kingdom.

Yet we held back. We had reservations. Fears. We made excuses.

We attempted, in our evasion, to cut Christ down to our size, to use the God who, in Christ, attempts to use us. Forgive us our timidity, our lack of holy imagination. Come to us as you are, not as we would have you. Speak to us. Command us. Call us to risk great things in your name.

Fill us with determination to have life and life abundantly. Enable us to move out of our self-centeredness and hesitancy, to come forth and commit, even with our reservations and doubts, to have faith in you. Amen.

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