

Fourth Sunday After Pentecost
Year A, RCL
June 28, 2020
North Fork Ministries
Hebrew Scripture:

Genesis 22:1-14

God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 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." 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. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. 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." 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. 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?" Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together.

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. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He 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." And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place "The Lord will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided."

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The story of Abraham and his son Isaac and Abraham's willingness to obey God's command and sacrifice his son, brings to mind the Yiddish folk tale that goes something like this: Why did God not send an angel to tell Abraham to sacrifice Isaac? It's because God knew that no angel would take on such a task. Instead, the angels said, "If you want to command death, do it yourself."

The tale rings true. After all, how could even an angel of the Lord be willing to demand that Abraham slaughter, like a sacrificial lamb,

the longed-for son that he and Sarah had been granted in their old age.

This story that Christians call “the sacrifice of Isaac” and which Jews call “the akedah”, or the binding of Isaac, has provoked fierce theological debate over the centuries. Is it a story of a cruel and abusive God, a gullible Abraham, of extreme religious violence? Or is it a story of the challenge of faith and obedience to God's will?

Many try to dismiss the challenges of the story by arguing that it is included in scripture as a way of portraying the cultural shift away from human sacrifice (that was fairly common among the primitive religions of the time) and toward animal sacrifice. This may very well be, as other Old Testament texts specifically forbid child sacrifice. However, we are still left with the question of what such a troubling story has to say to us here in the 21st century.

What I glean from the story as I read it today is a series of questions that call to mind how we, as citizens of the United States, nearing the day in which we celebrate our independence, might also

be willingly sacrificing our children on an unholy altar.

How often are we willing to sacrifice our sons and daughters on battlefields when we engage in misguided military campaigns?

Must we sacrifice millions of our children to a life of imprisonment in pursuit of a fruitless war on drugs?

And in pursuit of unrelenting economic growth, must we condemn our children to live in a world of environmental catastrophe.

The story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac is perhaps the most horrific and troubling episode recounted in Holy Scripture. It was potentially a bloodbath followed by the ritualistic burning of the precious gift of the son that God had given Abraham and Sarah. Yet on one level it is also the story of a narrowly averted escape from the senseless waste of human life and potential.

Let me tell you another story, far less violent and gruesome than the tale of Abraham and Isaac, but

nonetheless illustrative of how we as parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles can so easily fall into the trap of sacrificing the human potential of our progeny. It's a story some of you have heard me tell before.

During my children's first visit to the North Fork three years ago, we drove to Greenport so that my grand daughter Colette could ride the carousel. She had never seen a carousel and didn't know what to expect, but we described the circling and rising and falling horses as best we could to 2-year-old and she grew excited at prospect of this mysterious experience. The short journey was not without incident. Already a Brooklyn girl more accustomed to walking or riding in a stroller than riding in a vehicle, Colette managed to get carsick and to throw up just before we arrived. Her uncle scampered off to a nearby restaurant to get napkins, her Dad went to buy her a new t-shirt, and her Mom and I stayed behind to console Colette and clean up the mess.

Having regrouped and with Colette happy and again anticipating the merry go round, we walked around the corner to Front Street and on to the harborside park where, much to the adults'

dismay, we discovered that the glassed encased carousel was closed during weekdays.

Cries of "Oh...man" and "Bummer" and "That's too bad" emanated from the mouths of the adults. "I'm sorry, Colette," I was about to say, when I looked down and saw her tiny face and hands pressed against the glass, eyes wide as she gazed on the colorful wooden horses inside - motionless, silent and stunningly beautiful. As one, we adults realized that Colette wasn't disappointed. She looked through the glass as if she were gazing at a shimmering crystal or an exquisite jewel box or a Faberge egg. She had no inkling that one might climb about the rainbow colored horses, and ride up and down and around, and that the silence of the morning might be replaced by the magic of music. What her child eyes beheld was all she thought there was to a carousel.

Later that weekend we found that the carousel was no longer closed, and with her eyes wide open with delight, Colette climbed aboard the carousel, mounted a painted stallion and learned firsthand of the sensations of sight and sound and movement that a merry-go-round provides. Her trembling voice cried "again" and "again" each

time the circling carousel ceased its orbit. Only the promise of a trip to the beach persuaded her to let go of her grip on the horse.

A piece of the world was no longer as it had seemed to her a week earlier.

Yet, I wonder how many of us never make that spiritual transition that happens when we cease to view the world through a darkened glass and step inside the reality of existence. It is so easy to think that the world of commerce, of entertainment, of advertisement, of distraction is all there is. It is so easy to stand at the threshold of another world, a world where we understand that all creation is one, a place of peace, of wholeness, of true life, of consciousness, a place of awareness of what is real, and yet never walk inside. It is so easy to live a life and never climb on the carousel.

And too many of us are willing to sacrifice our children, our collective children, God's children, to a life of anxiety and discontent because we never introduce them to world that has meaning and depth and tranquility. We begin to open that mystical world to our children by example, by finding for ourselves a place of peace, of full

engagement in all that God has to offer, a place of delight.

We heard the Psalmist ask this morning, "How long shall I have perplexity in my mind, and grief in my heart, day after day?" Perhaps until we cease to look at life through a darkened glass and climb aboard the carousel.