

UNBEARABLE SACRIFICE<sup>1</sup>  
Genesis 22: 1-14  
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens  
June 29, 2008

I don't like this story. It is unbearable...unbearable for Abraham, for sure, but also unbearable for us. I tend to avoid it, and the reason is clear: it is too disturbing; it shakes up my view of God; it is a story I prefer not to engage.

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But here we are, looking seriously at this grotesque story of child sacrifice, an act expressly forbidden in other parts of the Bible<sup>2</sup> but told here with no indication that Abraham was planning to do anything wrong.

If you don't normally attend church, but just happened to be here today, perhaps because of the music or because someone invited you, maybe you heard this scripture read and you are sitting there in a pew thinking that this is precisely the reason you don't attend church. You may secretly be thinking to yourself that you don't need to listen to this "twisted, abusive, misguided, patriarchal rhetoric about a God who demanded a human sacrifice and a father who was willing to do it."<sup>3</sup> If that is the case, I ask you to keep an open mind, for at First Baptist Church we are committed

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<sup>1</sup> ©Thomas R. McKibbens, June 29, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> See Leviticus 20: 2; Deuteronomy 12: 30-31; Psalm 106: 37-39; Jeremiah 7: 30-32.

<sup>3</sup> From a sermon by Sarah Buteux, "The Aqedah," June 26, 2005, First Church, Hadley, MA.

to the critical study of ancient stories such as this, and we are equally committed to the responsibility of each of us to judge for ourselves what is the meaning of these ancient texts. In Baptist lore, this is called “soul liberty.”

There are people who love this story. Soren Kierkegaard, the famous Danish philosopher, wrote an entire book on this story. He entitled it *Fear and Trembling* (1843), and he said at the beginning that he loved this story as a child, and as an adult came to admire it more and more as he grew older while at the same time understanding it less and less. I can appreciate that. I don't suppose any of us will ever fully understand this story.

One thing certain: it is not a story designed to make us wish that we were like Abraham, unless you want to be a wealthy male, who was a slave-holding, child sacrificing polygamist. Neither is it a template for how to treat children, for this story has long been targeted by psychoanalysts for its potential to encourage child abuse. In a famous Rembrandt painting of the story, Abraham is looking up toward heaven rather than at his son, his large hand completely covers the face of his son, preventing the boy from seeing or raising a cry. Not only is Isaac silenced, but only his torso shows

—his personal features are obscured. The boy has been turned into an object. He has been dehumanized by being made into a sacrifice.<sup>4</sup>

The story raises more questions than it answers. Did God really command him to sacrifice his son? Does God really test people this way? If Abraham was perfectly willing to argue with God about the lives of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, why would he not argue with God about the life of his son, his only son? And to be more contemporary, is it OK for us to kill people if we think God commands it? These are all legitimate questions when we read a story like this! So no wonder this story troubles us!

## II

It would have been entirely reasonable, for example, for Abraham to conclude that he was hallucinating, that he was only imagining that God would ask him to do such a thing, and that the voice asking him to sacrifice Isaac was the worst kind of evil temptation. If that were the case, the ethical thing to do would have been to dismiss the voice as a delusion.

In the same way, we look at people who imagine that they are commanded by God to strap a bomb around their waist and walk into a crowded shopping district and detonate the bomb. Or, the same is true for

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<sup>4</sup> Alice Miller, *The Untouched Key: Tracing Childhood Trauma in Creativity and Destructiveness*, p. 139. Quoted in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 1, p. 499.

fundamentalist Christians who think that God has commanded them to bomb an abortion clinic. No amount of religious zealotry or pious platitudes can excuse such an atrocity. We do not honor senseless violence even if it claims to be religiously inspired.

Should we listen to those in our community who advocate hatred and exclusion simply because they think God has commanded it? Does proof-texting hatred make hatred acceptable? Does quoting the Bible to defend hatred make hatred OK? The Bible is a precious book, but it must be handled with care. To cherry-pick a single verse from ancient scripture with no explanation of its context or meaning can cause terrible damage.

And here we are, a week before Independence Day, and we are hearing renewed debate among religious people about torture. By what stretch of the imagination does any person within our faith tradition believe that the God we worship would condone torture? Yet there are those who argue that terrorism is a category of crime that excuses torture. It makes me wonder sometimes if in our efforts to secure safety for our people and justice for the perpetrators, we are losing our own soul.

### III

Before we dismiss this ancient story about Abraham and Isaac, it would be good to remember that there is tremendous power lodged in its

words. I don't mean magical power; I mean the strange power of a compelling story. I mean that the drama of the story is impossible to miss. *...your son...your only son...Isaac...whom you love!* As they approach the place of sacrifice, Abraham tells the servants to wait, that he and Isaac will go on alone. The drama begins to build. Abraham places the wood on Isaac's shoulders, and they walk together in silence...father and son. Finally, Isaac asks his father in heart-breaking innocence, *Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?* *God will provide,* says his father.

They continue to walk. At last they reach the holy place, and Abraham builds the altar and places the wood in order. Then the story seems almost too orderly, too simple, too easy: *He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.* It is almost unbearable to read. There is no indication of Isaac resisting, no mention of Isaac screaming out, crying, flailing his arms, or attempting to run. The climax of the story comes when the knife is drawn and held up. It is that unbearable moment that Rembrandt captures in his famous painting. It is a moment when we are holding our breath.

And then the voice: *Abraham...do not lay your hand on the boy....* And we all exhale. It is a supercharged emotional moment.

The *Christian Century* carried an article about an experience

one minister had with this story.<sup>5</sup> The minister recounts how he showed a dramatic film of the story, with the Israeli actor Topol playing Abraham. It was an austere sight to see the depiction of Abraham struggling up the windswept, dusty Mt. Moriah—knife under his coat and his son trudging silently behind him. Finally, the bronze blade is raised, the boy's black eyes flash in horror; then the voice stabs the knife, the ram bleats from the thicket, and it is over.

After the film there was discussion. The minister asked the academic question: Can this ancient story have any significance for us? And before he could get the question out of his mouth, a woman, whose hands had been twitching during the movie, said, "We sent our son off to college. He got an engineering degree, and he got involved in a fundamentalist cult. He married a girl in the cult; they had a baby; our only grandchild. Now they will have nothing to do with any family members outside the cult." And she started to sob, and no one knew what to say.

The silence was broken, this time by a middle-aged man. "I'll tell you the meaning of this story for me. We've decided to look for another church." "What?" said the minister. "Why?"

"Because when I look at that God, the God of Abraham, I feel I'm near a real God, not the sort of dignified, businesslike, Rotary Club god we

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<sup>5</sup> William Willimon, "On a Wild and Windy Mountain," in *The Christian Century*, March 16, 1983, pp. 237-8.

chatter about here on Sunday mornings. Abraham's God could blow a man to bits, give and then take a child, ask for everything from a person and then want more. I want to know *that* God."

Someone else was crying now, a young woman whom the minister had not yet met, a visitor to the congregation. The woman sitting next to her put her arm around her. "Gloria wanted me to tell you that her husband left her and the two children last week. She wants us to pray for her," she explained.

The minister confessed that such a discussion was like standing on a wild and windy mountain. When the wind stopped blowing and people began to go home, he thought to himself: "How odd that we who make our homes and plant our gardens under the shadow of the mushroom cloud, who regularly discard our innocents in sacrifices to far lesser gods than Yahwey, should look condescendingly upon Abraham, who would know that a mad, disordered, barbaric age like ours needs more than faith in a god who can be served without cost. How puny is this orderly, sanitized religion before the hard facts of life."

## V

The sky darkens, the wind howls and a young man walks up another Mt. Moriah, believing that he serves a God who demands everything and

who stops at nothing. He carries a crossbeam on his back rather than sticks for a fire, but like Abraham, he is in love with a wild and restless God whose call is to an unbearable sacrifice of love.