

A Cup of Cold Water
Genesis 22:1-14; Matt 10: 40-42

The temptation this morning is to jump right into our Gospel reading. In fact, several weeks ago I titled my sermon on our reading from Matthew. I admit it would be a lot more relaxing for all of us to skip over the difficult Genesis passage for a complex, but in comparison, mild scripture. Over the last few weeks, however, our readings have been pointing us to not choose the easy road. We've been reminded again and again that doing what's right and necessary usually comes with work and some discomfort. So, let's jump into our Genesis reading.

First, I'll just say what most of us are probably thinking. This one is a doozy! There is so much wrong with the story of Isaac's binding in our Genesis reading.

For our modern world, Abraham's actions are unthinkable. It is hard to get out of our context and into the world of Abraham and Isaac. The setting for this story is 2500 years ago in the land of the Philistines. Today this would be in Palestine. Abraham is not residing in the land of Israel or in Judea. He is in the land of another ethnic and religious group. Just prior to our reading in Genesis, Abraham is referred to as an alien in the land he resides in. In the land of the Philistines, and in many of the other cultures surrounding the ancient Israelites, worship still included blood sacrifice. It was common practice to offer either an animal or another human as a sacrifice. In addition, many of these traditions held that the first born of a family belonged to the deity alone.

Out of these traditions ancient Judaism arose. As the ancient Israelite religion was forming, it retained the custom of thinking of one's first born as belonging to God. While the ancient Israelites held to this belief, they did not practice human sacrifice. The idea was metaphoric.

The story of Abraham and Isaac takes place during these early days in the formation of Judaism. It is part of the ancestral stories, and it marks a time when Judaism was rising out of the existing culture and existing traditions. While Judaism does not form with human sacrifice, it arose from a time and place where its neighbors were still practicing this. Therefore, the Jewish people needed to address the issue. To ignore a huge change in religious practice from what existed before would be akin to Jesus proclaiming the necessity of the Eucharist without teaching about its connection to the Passover feast.

In the subsequent teachings of the rabbis through history, the binding of Isaac is seen as a story about the power of faith. The binding of Isaac is understood as a story about how God provides whenever we trust in God. It is the power of trusting in God even when the situation seems hopeless.

A prominent Jewish scholar and professor of theology, Abraham Joshua Heschel, spoke about the binding of Isaac in a speech he gave in 1967. He described a time when he was seven years old and was hearing the story for the first time. Heschel recounts:

“Isaac was on his way to Mount Moriah with his father; then he lay on the alter bound, waiting to be sacrificed. My heart began to beat even faster; it actually sobbed in pity for Isaac. Behold, Abraham now lifted the knife. And now my heart froze within me with fright. Suddenly the voice of the angel was heard: ‘Abraham, lay not thy hand upon the lad, for now I know that you fear God.’ And here I broke out in tears and wept aloud. ‘Why are you crying?’ asked the rabbi. ‘You know that Isaac was not killed.’

And I said to him, still weeping, “But Rabbi, supposing the angel had come a second too late?” The rabbi comforted me and calmed me, saying that an angel cannot come late.”

Heschel comes to agree that an angel, as an agent of God, cannot come late; however, “man, made of flesh and blood, may be.” Human beings may be late. Our humanness often leaves us unsure of what to do and how to respond to the pain and atrocities of our world. We often arrive with help and support long after the need for both arise.

Heschel was a man who knew a bit about faith in times of trial. He was born in Warsaw, educated in Berlin and served as the head of the Central Organization for Jewish Adult Education in Frankfurt, Germany until his deportation in 1938 by the Nazis to Poland. Just before the Nazi invasion of Poland, Heschel was assisted in fleeing to London before ultimately arriving in America. While Heschel was able to make it to freedom, his mother died at the hands of the Nazis, one of his sisters lost a leg in a German bombing and two of his other sisters died in concentration camps. Heschel could have spent the rest of his life in utter despair.

Instead, he centered his life and his theology on the Hasidic concept of *tikkun olam*: the restoration of the world. Heschel believed his faith called him, and his fellow Jews, to actively participate in the world as “a leap of action.” Jewish tradition often upholds the binding of Isaac as the time God made it clear that human sacrifice was not to be a part of Judaism. Heschel goes one step farther and asks, then, what is it we are called to do?

We are to put an end to human sacrifice, an end to the acceptance of someone else’s suffering for our economic benefit. We are to put an end to thinking of another person as dispensable in order to maintain our own notion of sanctity and security. We are to set ourselves apart from the standards of this world and align ourselves with the standards God calls us to.

While we bristle at the idea of worshiping a God who would even ask a person to sacrifice one of their own, our society asks this of us all the time. In a recent article in the *Christian Century*, entitled “At What Cost: Imagining an Economy that Doesn’t Sacrifice

Humans”, Whitney Wilkinson Arreche breaks down a comment made by her Lieutenant Governor, Dan Patrick, of Texas. In an interview in March, Patrick stated that he sees the part of our population most vulnerable to the Coronavirus as a small necessary sacrifice for the economic stability needed to maintain the “American Dream”. Patrick envisions the “American economy as a god demanding the sacrifice of our most vulnerable.” In that vision, people are dehumanized. They are reduced to either “producers” or “products”. They are no longer a human being; they are a means to an end.

Arreche asserts Patrick’s commodification of our vulnerable populations seeks to alter our Christian understanding of humanity. “The particular, unique, made-in-God’s-image human is rendered abstract, invisible and disposable.” Arreche rebuts Patrick by emphatically stating her grandmother’s life is “not up for exchange as payment for business as usual.” She continues, “[My grandmother] is a human being, not a unit of economic production.”

This is not the way of God. This is not the way of a God who provides when all seems lost. This is not a way of life centered on restoration and wholeness. This is not the way of extravagant welcome.

In the Gospel of Matthew, we have been in Chapter Ten for three weeks now. Chapter Ten centers on mission. Christ calls his disciples, names them, proclaims them apostles and instructs them to go out and share his message widely and deeply. This week, Jesus focuses on welcome. He uses the word welcome six times in our short three verse reading.

Jesus tells his followers that those who “welcome a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward”. Those who welcome the disciples welcome the ones who sent them. “Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple ... none of these will lose their reward.” The little ones here is a reference to the disciples. Jesus often referred to his followers as “little ones”. Thus, whoever gives a drink of sustaining, life-giving water to his traveling disciples will be rewarded as the disciples themselves. Acts which uphold another’s dignity and survival are akin to the great work of the disciples to spread Jesus’ message.

Jesus has already given his disciples the charge to continue his ministry. These last three verses serve to tie it all together. The thing that clinches it all together is welcome: receiving another, accepting another. The word translated as welcome in our reading actually means to receive or to accept. Thus, the one who accepts a prophet or a righteous person as they present themselves, accepts Christ. When we accept people for who they are, if we accept them in all their humanity and accept the movement of God in their lives, we receive God.

We don’t accept some and reduce others to a commodity. We don’t welcome some into the fold and sacrifice others for prosperity. We welcome as Christ welcomed. We love as Christ loved: unconditionally and unceasingly. Christ sacrificed himself so that his people would never sacrifice someone else again. In John, Jesus tells us “there is no greater love than this, a man lays

down his life for his friends.” (John 15:13) Jesus instructs us the only sacrifice acceptable to God is the one we make for ourselves.

The time of sacrificing someone else for our prosperity is over. The time for allowing others to do our work is over. The time now is for us alone. The future of God’s kingdom depends on our ability to show up on time willing to do God’s work. The race is long and the mountain is high, but fear not. You are ready. Christ has called you, named you as his own, emboldened you to share his ministry, and shown you the power of an embracing and accepting welcome. Wherever your gifts and talents lay, Christ is ready to make use of it. Just sharing a cup of cold water with one working hard on the journey to show up on time is all that is required to render you as a disciple.