

**Hearing Voices**  
**Genesis 21:1-3; 22:1-14**  
**Northminster Presbyterian Church**  
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A leader of what would be a great nation, when faced with a challenge, draws his son and heir near to him, prepares him for sacrifice and slays his son to curry Divine favor.

It's sickening right? It's also not Genesis 21 and 22. It's 2 Kings, chapter 3 at verse 27. The king is the Mesha, the king of the Moabites, who is getting his clock cleaned in a battle with the Israelites in the time of the prophet Elisha in the 9th century before Christ, about 11 centuries AFTER Abraham has this strange interlude with his son. The Biblical record is consistent with recent archeological work done in Syria in and around the ancient city of Ur, the home of Abraham according to scripture. It demonstrates that Abraham and Sarah lived in a region at a time when child sacrifice, particularly of first sons, while not an everyday event, was regularly practiced among the elites as an act of worship and homage to the gods. So perhaps Abraham is not as shocked by today's events as we are.

I'm not suggesting we can glibly get past the parts of this text that make us terribly uncomfortable. Abraham has sent his wife's servant, Hagar, and his first born son Ishmael away and almost immediately we get this story. Abram, "exalted father" who is now to be called Abraham "father of the multitudes," doesn't seem to be anyone's candidate for Father of the Year. And this test makes us so uncomfortable learning that God would contemplate child sacrifice. The fact is that Abraham's relationship with this God is relatively new. So, when he heard this request, no doubt he was heartsick, but he would not have been as shocked as we are.

And then there's that whole testing thing. God "tests" Abraham. Why? Would God test us? Test our faith to see if we are good enough? I'll admit it's a part of this text that has always bothered me. But this week, my colleague, the Rev. Linda Pepe, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Moorestown, New Jersey, reminded me that when teachers give a test in school, from a teaching perspective, it's not about whether a student is good enough. It's about whether that student is ready for the next level of material.

When the writer of Genesis says that God tested Abraham, what if it's not like a standardized test, but a good pedagogical test to see if Abram, exalted father, is ready to be Abraham, father of multitudes? If that's true, then for us it never means that we use this text to suggest that someone who wouldn't do this doesn't have adequate faith because this is not a one-size-fits-all quiz. But this is part of God's preparation of Abraham for all that lies ahead.

So with that understanding, if we try to put ourselves in Abraham's shoes, then, what might this text that some have called "unpreachable" have for us today?

You may have noticed that this narrative is actually an extended series of conversations. And if we attend to the voices in the text, something remarkable

emerges, for the entire story is structured around the three voices that Abraham hears and how he responds to each.

The first voice:

“He said to him, ‘Abraham!’ ...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.’”

The voice we hear is a voice that calls Abraham to risk something, to risk the promise that is at the heart of Abraham’s relationship with God. For the last 10 chapters of Genesis it has all been about God choosing Abraham and God promising Abraham a family, a nation of descendants, a legacy that will live beyond him. And now, this same voice asks him to put all of that at risk, to essentially put his future, his hope, his identity back into God’s hands.

But there is something else worth noting here. The Hebrew term that is used for God here in this part of the story is Elohim, a generic reference to God, a word that can be and is used in the Bible to describe other gods. It’s almost as though the crafter of the text wants us and Abraham to think that this God is acting like all the other gods who demand or accept the sacrifice of the heir. And what is Abraham’s faithful response to this bizarre intrusion? “Here I am.” He hears the voice and does not run from it. He is willing to act on faith, to respond even to the voice that asks for his very future and says, “Here I am.”

And then there is the second voice, Isaac’s: “Father! ... The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” It is the voice of innocence, the voice of the one who seeks knowledge, the voice of the one who is at risk himself. In a sense, Isaac speaks with the voice of all the children of God who are in peril, whether they know it or not — the addict, the abused child, the single mother, the poor, the homeless, the cold, the lonely. These are the voices of the anxious, of those who are in need of comfort. And what is Abraham’s faithful response? “Here I am.” He hears the voice and does not turn his back. He does not hide from the vulnerable but is present with him, even though it must pain him. He puts his own peace of mind at risk by his presence with the child he loves, even in the midst of this confusing and scary time. He does not distance himself but rather risks the vulnerability that comes from being with the one at risk, acting in faith that God will provide a way forward for both of them.

And then there is that final voice: “Abraham, Abraham! ... Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you (revere) God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.”

The final voice is not described as Elohim. That final voice that stops Abraham’s hand in the Hebrew is “malak min-Yahweh,” literally the “messenger of Yahweh.” This is the name for God our Jewish cousins will not speak or write, the intimate holy name for the God who calls Abram and Sarai to come to the Promised Land; who promises to make of them a great nation. This is no generic god. This is THE God, the saving God, the God of protection, the God who does things a different way. This is the unexpected God.

If we are in Abraham's time, a God who tells us to sacrifice our child might be expected, but a God who steps in and says no, this is not how things work between us, a God that is more concerned about our safety and protection than Divine Honor?

And what is Father Abraham's faithful response to this voice? You know it already: "Here I am." Even in the midst of the torturous moment that this must be for him, he is still open to the calling voice of God. He will put his future, his vulnerability and his expectations at risk.

So what do all these voices have to do with us? What does all this risking mean for us? What if the invitation is for us to put our futures, our identities at risk by placing them in the hands of a loving God and not into the clutches of the world's, the gods, of our own making, the generic gods — like hate or greed or envy — or even the more innocuous generic gods — success, or winning, or power, or wealth?

Because — and I know I risk offense here, but bear with me — if we think those generic gods aren't demanding that we sacrifice ourselves or our children, we aren't paying attention.

This week marked the 54th anniversary of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing. On Sunday morning, September 15th, 1963, at 10:22 in the morning, 15 sticks of dynamite placed under the steps of that African American congregation's church building exploded, killing Addie Mae Collins (14), Cynthia Wesley (14), Carole Robertson (14) and Carol Denise McNair (11) who were in the basement putting on their choir robes and getting ready for church. The bombers were four members of the Klan, church-going men themselves, who were part of a campaign of violence against Black-owned businesses and organizations. You tell me, were those children sacrificed to the gods of white privilege and racial hate or not?

And look around today. Teen girls starve themselves to look like magazine models or deem themselves unworthy of love if they don't— sacrificed to the generic god of beauty. Transgender youth, rejected by family, become victims of exploitation on the street—sacrificed to the generic god of cis-gendered, heterosexual hegemony. The once-revered high school basketball athlete and star student, who thought his only value was in winning, is injured and learns he can no longer play competitively; so he somehow loses himself, and engages in self-harm—sacrificed to the generic god of winning. Less dramatic examples are all around us as we sacrifice ourselves, our friends, our children on the altars of privilege, pride or politics.

What if we risk being sacrificed, or sacrificing others, anytime we are holding something back from being offered into the gracing, life-affirming love of God? Abraham's greatest hope, his defining hope, was this boy, Isaac, whom he did not withhold from God. What do we withhold from God? What sign of promise, or hope for our futures, or source of security do we cling to so tightly that we are actually making it our generic god, which may someday demand of us the sacrifice of our truest humanity? Is it those financial plans for the future or these ideas for whom and what our children will be and do, or that blueprint for how life or job or

church is “supposed” to go? None of those things is inherently evil, but they cannot carry the weight of being why we live and who we are.

Eventually, the God who calls out to Abraham to avoid death **would** allow a sacrifice to go forward, a sacrifice of God’s own self, coming among us in the divine mystery and human reality of Jesus Christ. God the father and God the son would together face the terror of a cross and triumph in a resurrection that pronounced, yet again, that sacrificing our beloved children is not God’s way of dealing with the world. And nothing is beyond the reach of God’s love — even death itself.

Friends, the voices that Abraham does not run from are the voices that call to us, not only from the cross and the empty tomb, but also from all the world — voices that ask us what it means to offer up our power, our futures, our greatest hopes; voices that ask us to risk relationship and vulnerability with the powerless and those who are victimized by the world around us; voices that ask us to surrender our expectations of what parts of our lives are God’s and what parts are ours. And each of these voices awaits our response. Can we, like Abraham and like Christ respond: “Here I am. Here we are,” not in fear, but in faith — like Abraham remembering how God has made and kept promises; remembering that all these things we are called to put at risk are offered to a God who does not seek to sacrifice us, but who does ask us to offer ourselves, in love and hope for the protection, the care and the love of all of God’s children.

From Abraham’s household came three of the world’s great religions. What might God make out of our faithfulness? I can’t wait to find out.