

# JUNE 7, 2020 | SERMON

Genesis 22:1-14 | The Rev. Catherine Healy | St. Paul & the Redeemer | Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

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I have a good friend who grew up in a very observant Jewish household. She and her siblings went to Hebrew school twice a week and synagogue services on Saturdays—even on birthdays, even on snow days; no exceptions, no matter how much they complained.

But one Saturday, after her five-year-old brother had a screaming meltdown in the middle of services, her parents made an exception to the rule. Once a year, on the day of the reading of the Akedah—the binding of Isaac—little Isaac was allowed to stay home.

Today's story from Genesis is a hard one to get through, even if you're not named Isaac. I've known clergy who refused to preach it, and Sunday-school teachers who refused to teach it. In modern times, it's been recast as a story of child abuse, or of the horrible things people will do when they think they're being led by God. How could any God ask a parent to make such a sacrifice? How could any parent, even to please God, be willing to sacrifice their child?

The book of Genesis tells us what people did but doesn't waste a lot of words on how they felt about it, so we're left to imagine Isaac's terror and Abraham's shame, Sarah's horror when she learned what had happened—which she must have, eventually.

It's on us to wonder if Abraham's family ever trusted him again. If God, having demanded this sacrifice, really felt pleased.

I've read a lot about this story, trying to find an interpretation that will make it okay. But nothing makes it okay. Nothing makes it acceptable. Even the voice of an angel from heaven, averting disaster and saving the day, can't turn back the clock and erase everything that happened before.

The best interpretation I've found comes from a Bible scholar named Ellen Davis, who argues that trying to sanitize this story misses the point. The *point* is that it's not okay. It's in the Bible not as an example of faithfully following God's orders, but as a reminder that sometimes life is not okay. Sometimes it feels like God is asking us to make choices that are completely intolerable. And even then, in the chaos and pain, when we can't see a way out, God is faithful.

Davis writes: "The point of this story is *not* to make people want to believe in Abraham's God ... Rather, **this harrowing story exists to help people who already believe make sense of their most**

**difficult experience**, when God seems to take back everything they have ever received at God's hand."<sup>1</sup>

When we talk about the beauty and hope of "the Biblical story," the binding of Isaac is not a major selling point.

The binding of Isaac is not a story you would print in a pamphlet. It's not going to lead anybody to the faith.

But it *is* a tool for making meaning out of a situation where you have two choices, and they are both unthinkable.

Or when you find yourself thinking: *How could a loving God put me through this?*

We know from prior chapters that Abraham is not the smartest or the most honest or the most unwavering in his devotion. That's the arc of his story: Abraham is so *ordinary*. He is chosen by God *because* he is ordinary, not because he is special.

He keeps finding himself in situations that are totally out of his depth, things he never planned for, where he doesn't know what to do next.

And in this ultimate set of unthinkable choices—to turn away from God or to kill his own son—his story reaches a crescendo.

He doesn't know what to do next—except to be faithful.

*God will provide*, he tells Isaac.

He can be faithful, even if he can't make everything okay.

Abraham is here for us as an example of faith even through extraordinary suffering, especially suffering that comes from an ethical dilemma where the decision is ours to make.

The Bible won't give us any easy answers, because to do that would be a lie. It would diminish the real anguish we feel, the same anguish Abraham must have felt as he held up a knife over his son.

There are no easy answers—only the call to stay in relationship. Only the promise that if we, somehow, can find a way to be faithful to God, God will be faithful to us.

If we had any illusions that we lived in a world of easy answers, or that God had promised to protect us from suffering, the events of the last few months have blown those apart.

Some of us have lived through painful ethical decisions. All of us have lived in isolation and fear.

And yet God has stayed with us—even as we struggle with questions that have no easy answers.

God never deserted Isaac. God never deserted Abraham. God may not intervene in the way we want, but God will keep on staying with us. Even when everything else is a question mark, we can count on that.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen F. Davis, [Radical Trust](#), *Faith and Leadership*, July 25, 2011 (emphasis added).