

How Do We Listen?
Genesis 22:1-14
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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Again today we heard a difficult passage from Genesis, the first book of the Bible.

Today's passage, like others before it, is difficult on at least two levels –

- First, what we read in the text and, in this case, what it says about both God and Abraham,
- Secondly, how we have traditionally interpreted it and what we have said to each other not only about this text but about our faith.

So, as we begin this conversation, I remind you again of our goal in looking at these texts this summer. We are looking again and reading again...working to set aside what we've been taught and to read the stories again with a willingness to ask questions about what the text actually says, about how the context – both of the story and of the time in which the story was recorded – might have impacted what the text says, and about what messages there are for us, some of which haven't been part of what we've heard in the past, some which may even be in direct conflict with what we've heard in the past.

Remember, we are working to take our cue from the Jewish understanding of Midrash which includes the idea that scripture *begins* rather than *ends* conversation. So, I remind you that it is actually good if we read scripture and it brings up questions or causes us to notice points of conflict and contradiction. These are conversations we want to be having.

A part of that, as I mentioned last week, is that as we seek to understand the context we look both to extra-biblical texts – things not in our canon of 66 books – and to what history tells us about the world around these Bible stories. These can often shed great light on the stories that

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are being told and give us greater understanding and insight into how and why things might have happened. We also look at the bigger picture within scripture – on what has come before and what comes next because it often gives us insight. As Rabbi Esther Hugenholtz, now Rabbi down the hill at Agudas Achim Synagogue, wrote, “Looking at the context of a Torah passage or verse is an ancient Jewish technique of text study. [This is] the joining of different passages so that we may glean meaning from their interconnection. In a sense it is like watching a soap opera. What happened in the previous episode and how will this impact the unfolding plot?”¹

So, remembering all this, let’s think together about today’s passage.

My guess is that most of us in the room have most often heard the same thing. The traditional interpretation is to applaud Abraham’s obedience. God says, “Jump,” and Abraham says, “How high?” In many ways this is an understandable reading of the text, at least at the surface. And certainly, if we read on to the commentary in the verses that follow what we read today, we hear praise of Abraham there. And, after all, if we believe God to be the supreme commander of all things, then shouldn’t we respond with obedience?

And yet there are some great problems with this traditional interpretation. The first being that blind obedience is not the relationship God and Abraham have had up until this point. If you read the previous stories there has been laughter in the face of a promise, there have been instances of God’s plans being altered because Abraham and Sarah didn’t know how God would make it work, there have been questions and even arguments with God. The most recent of those was a few chapters back, connected with last week’s story, in which Abraham, upon hearing of God’s intention to destroy Sodom, argued on behalf of the people of Sodom. So, the first question we might ask about this traditional interpretation is this: If Abraham argued on behalf of

¹ Rabbi Esther Hugenholtz at <http://rabbihugenholtz.blogspot.com/2011/01/rosh-hashana-sermon.html?m=1>

the people of Sodom, would he really not argue on behalf of his son? In fact, Rabbi Hugenholtz points out, “We can read the text in a radically different way. When the Torah states that ‘God tried [or tested] Abraham’, [perhaps] the true test was not whether Abraham would sacrifice Isaac but rather whether Abraham would have the holy chutzpah to do again what he did before. Resist. Defy. Argue. Isn’t this the pattern of behavior that the Eternal expects (and demands) from his faithful servant?”²

Not only is blind obedience not part of their relationship, but it is not a healthy thing. I am reminded of James Fowler’s work on stages of faith which I have mentioned before. One of his findings in his study was that organized religion does best when people remain in the early stages of faith – when they continue to adhere without question to the teachings of the authority rather than asking questions and developing their own faith. While we must remember that Abraham was not part of an organized Jewish religion, but rather was the first generation of those seeking to pledge allegiance to one God, we can also remember that the recording and interpreting of these stories happened later, in a time when obedience served not only the God of the story, but the institution of the Judeo-Christian faith. And so, we might ask if God really demanded blind obedience of Abraham or if that was a later development of the institution. After all, we must remember that while scripture praises Abraham, from this point on we never again hear of a conversation between God and Abraham, something we had heard much of previously.

And we can’t forget Isaac. One of the problems of this text and the common interpretation is that it treats Isaac like a prop in a story, not like a human being. While we can acknowledge that children’s value was understood differently in the Ancient Near East, let us not

² Hugenholtz

pretend that we don't see evidence that Abraham loved and valued both of his children. And if we are willing to let the child have a voice, then we might hear about the damage done to him and to his relationships both, with his father and his God, after this incident. In fact, while in verse 5 Abraham asks the servants to stay at the foot of the mountain and he says, "The boy and I will walk up there, worship, and then come back to you."³ And yet, at the end of story, in verse 19 we only hear that Abraham returned to the servants. Although Abraham and Isaac remain connected, including when Abraham arranged a wife for Isaac, many point out that we are not told of any more interaction between the two until Isaac and Ishmael bury their father.

And then there is Sarah. She who is so present in the other stories, who helps make the decision about Abraham and Hagar having a child, who is joyful at the birth of Isaac...she is absent in this story. And the next thing we hear is about her death. A death that other Jewish sources indicate was of a broken heart.⁴

And, if we pay attention to the historical context, we must also acknowledge that while Jewish culture was and always has been against child sacrifice there were other cultures and religions for whom this was a practice. This reality might find us asking to whom Abraham was really listening. Even as he was striving to listen to God, it is not unlikely that in a world where others sacrificed children, he could have misheard. Perhaps the true voice of God wasn't the command to sacrifice his son, but instead the one that rang out loud and clear in stopping that very action.

Again, don't forget that the stories of Abraham come before the people had an identity as a people, before the giving of the Ten Commandments, before the hundreds of laws to support

³ Genesis 22:5, Common English Bible.

⁴ Genesis Rabbah 58:5, cited at [https://images.shulcloud.com/618/uploads/PDFs/Divrei_Torah/161119-The%20Binding%20of%20Isaac-Why%20\(Vayera\).pdf](https://images.shulcloud.com/618/uploads/PDFs/Divrei_Torah/161119-The%20Binding%20of%20Isaac-Why%20(Vayera).pdf)

them. Even the well-intentioned today sometime mishear the direction of God – why couldn't Abraham?

And what do we do with Abraham? He will forever be held up as the father of the Judeo-Christian tradition. And that is okay. Even as we ask these questions we can acknowledge that there is a place for appropriate obedience and, in other stories, Abraham demonstrates that. We should also acknowledge that there is no evidence that Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac is malicious. Certainly, the words he speaks to both the servants and Isaac himself indicate that he believes they will both return and that a sacrifice will be provided. Rather than malicious, it was likely that Abraham continued to have hope in God and to believe in a better outcome. And, even in the worst moments of this story, his heart was certainly breaking. Meanwhile, it remains a difficult story and we can't dismiss it too easily.

This is a challenging story. It reminds of us of how important it is to read beyond the words on the page. Because the questions we ask change if we pay attention to who Abraham was in the bigger picture and what his relationship with God was like. They change if we pay attention to the world around Abraham and the world at the time of the recording of Genesis. And, as we talked about last week, they certainly change when we lay this story next to the greater themes of the Bible and next to the person of Jesus. While God asks for many reasonable sacrifices of us, there is no other evidence that God asks for or condones this kind of sacrifice. And so, as we discern God's voice, we are reminded that whatever we hear should be laid next to other words we know to be true.

We may find ourselves walking away from this text with more questions than answers. In some ways, it is easier to just accept the traditional interpretation with all of its struggles and not ask any questions. But, we also must note the damage that we do – to the Isaacs among us

struggling to find a voice, to the Sarahs who fear for the children, to the Abrahams who are listening but just aren't sure whose voice they are hearing, and to the God who we worship, a God we know to be filled with love and compassion, a hand that reaches out to stop our violence and a voice that calls us back to our senses.

This story reminds us that questions help us to listen and to discern. This story reminds us that we must listen carefully and check what we hear against other things we know. And this story gives us hope, that in seeking and asking and thinking, we can find the voice of God.

Amen.