

THE KNIGHT OF INFINITE RESIGNATION
GENESIS 22: 1-18

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A burglar was creeping noiselessly through a darkened home, filling his bag with various valuables. As he reached his hand out to a box of jewelry, he heard a voice say, "Jesus is watching you."

Shaken, the burglar stopped. For a full minute he did not dare breathe.

Finally, he switched on his flashlight and carefully played it around the room but saw nothing. Convinced that it must have been his imagination, he turned off the flashlight and continued in his quest for another person's wealth. He was busily unhooking a stereo set when he again heard, "Jesus is watching you."

This time he nearly jumped out of his skin. Beads of sweat popped out on his face, and as he switched the light on again, the beam shook violently from his terror. He looked about the room and noticed a birdcage in the corner. Upon closer inspection, he discovered a parrot in the cage.

"Are you the one that spoke to me just now?" asked the burglar.

"Yes, I am," said the parrot.

"Why did you say, 'Jesus is watching you?'"

"Because I thought you needed to be warned," replied the parrot.

By the time the burglar was over his fright and was more than a little annoyed that this smart-mouthed parrot had scared the living daylights out of him.

"What's your name?" asked the burglar. "Moses," the parrot replied.

"Hah!," the man said. "What kind of people would name their parrot Moses?"

"The same kind of people who would name their Rottweiler Jesus."

Life is full of surprises, isn't it? The Bible, as realistic a book as you will ever read, tells one story after another about surprise, about the unexpected, the unusual breaking through the usual, the ineffable overcoming the quantifiable. Consider the parables of Jesus: they are filled with little twists that turn our expectations on their head: a man regarded as an enemy helping a beleaguered traveler on the road to Jericho, an old man running to meet his long-lost son who has wasted his life in a far country, a woman calling the whole village to a party at her house because she has found a coin she had lost. Trouble is: you and I know the stories too well, so we know

how they are going to turn out.

In today's First Lesson we have one of the most compelling stories in the entire Bible, a story filled with terror and trouble, unexpected twists and unknowable outcomes. The story of Abraham and Isaac, my favorite and most troubling story in the saga of the patriarchs and matriarchs in the Book of Genesis, unfolds with mystery and meaning every time I read it. My grandson, Austin James Cranley, recently asked me why it is my favorite. To which I quickly replied, "Because it was Kierkegaard's!"

But there is more to it than that. Kierkegaard wrote not one but four incredible sermons on this text, each taking apart the story from a different angle. He called the best of the four, "The Knight of Infinite Resignation," denoting Abraham not as a person who simply gives in to God's demands but as one who moves forward without any understanding of the outcome of the demand.

If I were to ask you, What is faith? I suspect that more than a few in this congregation, indeed in most Christian churches, would respond about what you believe, about a set of propositions, with answers that denote faith as something to know. Pay attention: the Bible never talks about faith in such terms. The primary vocabulary for faith in the Bible, as Walter Brueggemann has pointed out, uses two terms that occur frequently together, *hesed* and *'emeth*, rendered "steadfast love and faithfulness," and eventually "grace and truth" (John 1:14). "The core claim of Israel's faith is that God is utterly reliable," declares Brueggemann.

That wonderful Southern, Christian writer from Milledgeville, Georgia, Flannery O'Connor, was having dinner one night in Manhattan with a group of sophisticated, literary, New York-type friends. Among them was a famous author, a lapsed Catholic who had grown disdainful of all things Christian. The conversation evolved into religious matters, specifically the sacraments, especially the Sacrament of Holy Communion. The famous woman writer gave some theological ground to Ms. O'Connor (or thought she did) when she declared that the Sacrament is "nice," it's a symbol. To which Flannery responded, "If it's just a symbol, I say to hell with it."

We live by symbols and ineffable moments and they point to deeper realities. But there occur repeatedly those illuminating moments, those compelling nudges by God that mean more than mere symbolic overtures. God speaks directly through them to us, and God demands a response.

Obedience to God's faithfulness requires more than merely following specific commands. Obedience means, rather, engaging in a life that embraces God's intentions, which are marked by compassion, mercy and forgiveness.

However! However, Israel can speak as well about unfaithfulness and infidelity, even on the part of the Lord. Read the Psalms of lament; they are cries of need and protest that summon God to be faithful to what God has previously said in the Covenant. One of the most astonishing qualities of Old Testament faith is that it entertains the thought—out of its experience of suffering—that God is, on occasion, absent, silent, even negligent.

And that's what we are dealing with in the story of Abraham and Isaac. This pithy narrative is a chapter in the history of salvation, including Exodus, covenant on Sinai, the wilderness wanderings, and finally settlement in Canaan. If we become aware of this larger story, the demand of God that Abraham sacrifice his only son, the one named Isaac, "the Promise," heightens the drama.

The story begins with an explanation of what it is about: "God tested Abraham" (verse 1). Typically when we hear or read a story from the Bible, we know more than the characters do. God does not tell Abraham that he is being tested. He hears only the horrifying command to take Isaac to the land of Moriah and offer him as a burnt offering. The narrator tells the story the way, say, Elmore Leonard or Lisa Scottoline would tell it in a modern detective story. We are given virtually no description but only action and dialogue. There is no speculation about the emotions or motives or feelings of the characters. The pace of the language compels us to move on.

"Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love" stresses both the affection between them and Isaac's unique place as the one on whom God has placed the promise of all future generations. The story becomes even more poignant as we see the father and son going on foot toward the mountain carrying the instruments of death in their hands (verse 6).

Although we have heard the story many times and know how it turns out, isn't it so powerful that every time we hear it we experience doubt, fear, even rage that God would make such a demand? Will the angel of the Lord arrive in time? Or as the little girl said in the Sunday School class upon hearing the story, "What if the angel had been late?"

We know that the story is about a test. But we quickly realize that it is really a story about life and death. The question, Will Abraham pass the test? becomes less significant than the other one, Will Isaac live? At the climax, both questions are answered at the same time. Abraham, who had never hesitated, is willing to obey, but God will not require the life of Isaac (verses 10-12).

As they are trudging up the mountain, the story becomes even more terrifying. When the boy asks the question, "Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" (verse 7), Abraham's answer is to me the most compelling moment in the story, "God...will provide." Did he know? Did he hope? Or was the response a ruse to keep the boy quiet? How many times have we used just such a religious platitude—in a stewardship campaign—certainly!—or when we faced the loss of money or the loss of a job or the loss of security. I can remember my mother using those very words, "God will provide," after Dad was fired time after time because of his alcoholism and we were relegated to one rented house after another.

But, we ask when we can find no satisfying answer, Why did not God need to test Abraham in the first place?

Central to the story is the question of faith. It is Abraham's faith that is tested, but more than that it is our faith that is tested. Faith is not defined by means of a theological treatise or a set of propositions. Neither does the Bible admonish us to be faithful. The Bible, unlike most of us who preach from it and many who teach from it, is never moralistic: it never says "You should" or

“You ought to be like this.”

The question of faith is answered with a story . It is the story of a person who trusted in God even when God appeared to be acting against God’s own promise. That is what faith is like. Faith is commitment, the directing of one’s trust toward God. It entails courage, risk and action.

Whether Abraham believed all along that God would not require the sacrifice of Isaac we cannot know. On the other hand, such faith in God’s purposes is almost beyond comprehension, isn’t it? “Ethically speaking, what Abraham planned to do was murder Isaac,” wrote Kierkegaard. “Religiously, however, he was willing to sacrifice Isaac. In this contradiction lies the very anguish that can indeed make anyone sleepless. And yet without that anguish Abraham is not the one he is. Neither would faith be what it is. By faith Abraham went out. He left one thing behind, and took one thing with him. He left his earthly understanding behind, and took faith with him. Otherwise he would have never gone forth.”

As Kierkegaard conjectured in one of his sermons on the text: what do you think Abraham and Isaac talked about on the way home? And what did they dare mention about that fateful day on Mount Moriah for the rest of their lives? Would either of them ever be the same again? No. Certainly not.

Well, you all have put up with me for a full month, and you are beginning, I suppose, to catch on to my favorites: Kierkegaard, Brueggemann, Fred Craddock and, of course, Barbara Brown Taylor (yet again!): “Our belief is less like certainty than like trust or hope. We are betting our lives on something we cannot prove, and it is hard to be very smug about that. Most of the time the best we can do is to live as if it were all true and when we do, it all becomes truer somehow.”

One more: Tertullian. Who is he? Some of you are asking. He was one of the so-called “Desert Fathers” of the early church, and he argued constantly with another of his contemporaries: Cyprian. Tertullian’s struggle with sin was deep, abiding, difficult. He reduced sin to a root of impatience with God. Think about that: Abraham is, like you and me, impatient with God. He wants to know how this test is going to turn out. On the other hand, all that saves him is an abiding trust, a patience with God’s will.

Garret Keizer told a story that comes close to what I am trying to say about Abraham, his faith and his relationship to God. Mr. Keizer’s wife had a friend who once lived in the remote town of Victory, which has no church, no store and no school, and which is locally famous for two things: its sizable bog and its status as the last town in Vermont to receive electricity. During the course of earning her master’s degree, this friend found it necessary to commute several times a week from Victory to the state university in Burlington, a good hundred miles away .

Coming home at night, she would see an old man sitting by the side of her road. He was always there, in subzero temperatures, in stormy weather, no matter how late she returned. He made no acknowledgment of her passing. The snow settled on his cap and shoulders as if he were merely another gnarled old tree.

She often wondered what brought him to that same spot every evening—what stubborn habit, private grief or mental disorder. “I wonder,” Keizer wrote, “if she didn’t somehow begin to doubt her senses, or believe in ghosts.”

Finally she asked a neighbor of hers, “Have you ever seen an old man who sits by the road late at night?”

“Oh, yes,” said her neighbor. “Many times.”

“Is he...a little touched upstairs? Does he ever go home?”

“He no more touched than you or me,” her neighbor laughed. “And he goes home right after you do. You see, he doesn’t like the idea of you driving by yourself out late all alone on these back roads, so every night he walks out to wait for you. When he sees your taillights disappear around the bend, and he knows you’re O.K., he goes home to bed.”

That old man symbolizes something at the heart of our experience: God’s faithfulness, God’s care for each of us, God waiting for us, like Abraham and Isaac, to make our way back home.