

CHOOSING LOVE

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The Hebrew scripture passage that we heard this morning is called the Akedah, or the Binding of Isaac in Judaism. Jewish commentators believe it refers back to ancient times when child sacrifice was still practiced by many religions. In other words, God was asking Abraham to do what the other neighboring tribes' gods asked them to do and Abraham responded just as his "neighbors" would have responded, by sacrificing their children to their gods.

This is one of those Biblical stories that I have struggled with for years. As a teenager I questioned how the God that I knew could ask someone to kill their own son. It didn't help as my relationship with God deepened and when I became a mother. I did notice that Abraham doesn't tell Sarah what God had asked him to do. So as I heard this story read in church over the years I struggled with what was the scripture saying? I wondered why Abraham didn't tell Sarah and why he didn't argue with God. He bartered with God over the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham asks God to spare Sodom if there are fifty righteous people, living there, then 45 righteous people, then forty, thirty, twenty and finally even if there are only ten righteous people in Sodom God agrees not to destroy the city. So Abraham has asked God to change God's mind in the past, so why not when God asks him to sacrifice Isaac? I read commentaries on the story, but I couldn't find anything that agreed with my experience of God as loving us and wanting the best for each of us.

Then I was reading a commentary on scripture by Madelene L'Engle called the *Rock that is Higher*. Madelene L'Engle is known for her children's books, esp. the Wrinkle in Time series. Madelene begins her commentary by explaining that she was leading a writer's workshop. She had asked the participants to write on Genesis 22:1-19. One woman, a Jewish-Christian had been raised hearing Midrashim, the Rabbis' commentaries on scripture. She had already written on the Binding of Isaac from several different perspectives. So Madelene L'Engle asked her to write from God's perspective.

The story is a dialogue between God and the archangel Raphael.

Raphael is very pleased with Abraham's response to God's demand [to sacrifice his son, Isaac,] and begins extolling Abraham's virtues to God. And God is not enthusiastic. The more Raphael praises Abraham, the less enthusiastic God gets. Finally Raphael says, "But God, you put Abraham to the test and he passed." God replies, "He did not pass. He failed. He chose **law over love.**"¹

¹ Madeleine L'Engle, *The Rock that is Higher*, (Wheaton, Ill.: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1993), 130.

Madeleine L'Engle continues that suddenly all kinds of lights went on for her because even though Abraham may have failed the test, God continued to love him, even as God continues to love each of us through all our failures in faith. As I read the story suddenly for the first time it made sense. Of course Abraham failed the test, but God continued to love him anyway. Just as God continues to love each of us even though we make bad decisions and fail to be the people God wants each of us to be. God continued to be with Abraham, just as God continues to be with us.

In the Christian tradition there is Peter, who on the night that Jesus is arrested in the garden, tells Jesus that:

“Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!”
Jesus said, “I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you have denied three times that you know me.”

We know the story how:

When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. Then a servant-girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said, “This man also was with him.” But he denied it, saying, “Woman, I do not know him.” A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, “You also are one of them.” But Peter said, “Man, I am not!” Then about an hour later still another kept insisting, “Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean.” But Peter said, “Man, I do not know what you are talking about!” At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. *The Lord turned and looked at Peter.* Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, “Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.” And he went out and wept bitterly.

After the resurrection, Jesus comes to Peter on the beach and asks him three times if he loves him. In his asking, Jesus forgives Peter for his denial and restores the relationship between them. Abraham in the binding of Isaac failed God, he chose Law over Love, and God loved him anyway.

[Sound the Shofar]

Each year the shofar, the ram's horn, is sounded on Rosh Hashanah to tell the people to “Wake Up!” Pay attention to what God is doing. The shofar, the ram's horn, is a reminder of God's providence, a reminder of how God provides for God's people. As the people hear the Binding of Isaac read on Rosh, Hashanah, the ram's horn reminds them that God will provide.

And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place “The LORD will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.”

The ram was there, but Abraham was so focused on what he thought God wanted him to do that he failed to see the ram. How often do we fail to see the opportunity or gift that God has given us because we are so focused on what we think God wants us to do. When Mark and myself were discerning our call to attend seminary I thought God was asking me to give up the trumpet. So I prayed and told God that I would give up the trumpet. I quit the orchestra, even sold one trumpet because I was sure that with going to seminary there would not be time for me to practice. Well once we arrived Mark and myself were asked to fill the newly created position of music tutors for the seminary community. I was asked to play for daily morning prayer and the Community Eucharist. A classmate's husband played with a quintet from the Air Force and they needed another trumpeter. God did provide the opportunity to practice and play my trumpet and continues to provide opportunities to play. I was so focused on going to seminary and my idea of what God intended that I failed to perceive that God would provide ways for me to use my musical abilities.

So now I have the opportunity to sound the shofar in church, saying "Wake Up, Pay attention to what God is doing!" Just as the shofar is sounded in the synagogue to remind people that in the Binding of Isaac God did provide and continues to provide for us. Each day God provides each of us with an opportunity to respond to those around us. Do we become so focused on what we think God wants us to do that we fail to see the opportunity before us? Using this scripture passage I encourage you to "look up" this week and notice the opportunities that God is providing in your life and the life of St Aidan's.

Abraham failed, he chose law over love, but God loved him anyway.