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“The Unthinkable”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

13th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

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Genesis 22:1–14; Psalm 13; Matthew 26:47–52

What is your worst nightmare?

I remember rather vaguely during the Cuban Missile Crisis of the early 60s,
we would have civil defense drills in elementary school.

When the siren sounded, they would march us all down to the basement
of the school and keep us there sitting against the cool walls,
our heads covered with our hands until the all-clear was voiced.

I was in the first grade or early in the second grade at the time.

What I remember *more clearly*, however, is my mother telling me
that if that ever happened for real, and if I thought it were more
than *just a test*, I had her permission to be like the Runaway Bunny
and run across the playground to our home
to hide in our own basement with her and my brothers.

I suppose that would have been my very first act of civil disobedience,
but I always envisioned myself thereafter as the Runaway Bunny,
ready to make a break for freedom, if warranted.

And I imagine that one of my mother’s worst nightmares
was to be separated from her children during a time of life-threatening crisis.
Perhaps many of us recall similar feelings when the 9/11/2001 crisis unfolded.

I suppose that Abraham's worst nightmare was to have to choose between his God
and his beloved son, his only son, Isaac, whom he loved.

Is this story in Genesis real or is it a dream?

Did Abraham actually have to make this horrendous choice

or did he just envision a scenario where the God who had promised him
descendants, as many as the stars and sand,

would suddenly throw the promise into doubt

by making him play Jenga with his lynchpin only son?

Was the promise too good to imagine without dire consequences?

It's interesting that this story is one that all three of the great Abrahamic faiths

have in common; this horror story is told in the Hebrew Bible,

included in our Christian Bible, and in the Muslim *Koran*, in sura 37.

It is the most celebrated episode in the patriarch Abraham's life in all three faiths,

and it is the most widely debated, the most misunderstood,

and the most troubling story, perhaps to all of us.

The Muslims, who were the last to include it in their sacred texts,

present it as a dream sequence, making it unclear if it ever actually occurred.

They have Abraham saying to his son, "I dreamt that I was sacrificing you.

Tell me what you think?"

To which the son replies, "Father, do as you are bidden.

God willing, you shall find me steadfast."

Abraham then lays the boy face down, and as he does, the Lord calls out,

"Abraham, you have fulfilled your vision. This indeed was a bitter test.

We ransomed his son with a noble sacrifice and bestowed on him

the praise of later generations. 'Peace be on Abraham'" (*Koran*, Sura 37).

Muslim scholars have interpreted the text to be about Ishmael rather than Isaac

because for Muslims, Ishmael was the favored son, so he would have been

the one Abraham took to offer to God.

The story in Judaism is referred to as the *Akedah*, or the binding of Isaac, although the word "binding" is nowhere to be found in the text, nor is the word "sacrifice;" only the word "offering."

(Feiler, Bruce. *Abraham*. p. 95)

Moreover, this is the first time in the Hebrew bible that the word "love" is used as part of the four-fold nomenclature God employs to identify the intended object of Abraham's offering: "take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you **love**, and..."

It's a shame, isn't it, that even at its genesis, love is entangled in death?

Maybe that's what the *Akedah*, the binding, is about:

the fact that love and death are strangely bound together.

If the story is really about Isaac, then it's interesting that he is the least compelling of the patriarchs.

He was almost not born – born to elderly parents late in life who snickered at the idea.

He was teased by his older half-brother, Ishmael.

He was coddled by his mother, and now, nearly killed by his father.

He will be deceived by his wife, Rebekah, and outwitted by his son, Jacob.

He's a simple man, an innocent one, which makes this episode even more poignant in that it implies *the expendability of an innocent*.

This story is never mentioned again in the Hebrew bible – it is unthinkable and unmentionable, this near-death of an innocent, simple man who bears the imprint as the first object of human love.

And in Christianity, it has been transformed by tradition into a topology for Jesus.

Mount Moriah is a foretaste of Calvary, some think.

Abraham loves God so much that he will offer his son, if asked.

God loves humanity so much that God will actually sacrifice God's son.

The writer of the book of Hebrews in the New Testament is the one who makes this connection:

"By faith, Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac," it says in Hebrews 11.

“He who had received the promises was about to offer his one and only son,
even though God had said to him,

‘It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.’

Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead,

and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death”

(when the ram was provided in the thicket). (Heb. 11:17–19)

The Gospel writer, John, calls Jesus the Lamb of God.

The Church Father, Tertullian, claims that Isaac carrying his own wood

is a foreshadowing of Christ being asked to carry his own cross.

In Christianity, both stories are joined as bookends of foretaste and fulfillment

in the person of Jesus Christ, according to this interpretation.

Nevertheless, it’s still a ghastly tale, even if Judaism, Christianity and Islam claim it as
fundamental to our faiths.

For some reason, it’s in our holy texts – *all of our holy texts*.

Perhaps the *Akedah*, the binding, is one of this horror story to all our faith narratives.

Perhaps the binding is of people of monotheistic faith,

wrestling together with this unimaginable holy mystery.

Perhaps the binding is of people of monotheistic faith immersed in human tragedy,

where innocent lives are so easily lost.

Poet Wilfred Owen in World War I wrote a poem based upon this story

called “The Parable of the Old Man and the Young.”

It pretty much traces the story according to the Bible until it reaches the end,

which goes like this:

*When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
Neither do anything to him. Behold,
A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.
But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.*

Owen uses it as an indictment of fathers willing to ship their sons off
to the unthinkable trenches of World War I.

Bob Dylan took the same tact in his poem "Highway 61 Revisited" in protest
to the unthinkable horrors of the Vietnam War.

Maybe someone used it again in the early 60s to speak about nuclear proliferation
and the unthinkable threat to innocent children who sit in cool basement
halls with only their hands to protect their heads.

I don't know. I was only a child then, as simple and innocent as Isaac or Ishmael.
Maybe someone should dredge it up in reference to the 74 school shootings
that have occurred since Newtown, CT in the United States
that have become what President Obama calls "the new norm."

Perhaps the servants should have considered disarming Abraham
before he walked his son up the hill to the school of burnt offerings.

Perhaps one of the servants should have been civilly disobedient and walked
up the hill with Abraham to protect the child.

Perhaps the people of the covenant should have developed a child protection
policy to ensure that children are adequately supervised and protected from
violence.

Most Christian interpretations link this story to the crucifixion
and to God's offering of God's only son, God's beloved, as an atonement
for our human proclivity to sin.

And I think it *is* appropriate to ask what this story has to say about the nature of God.
But my inclination is to link it to another episode that happened on a mountaintop,
to the arrest of Jesus on the Mount of Olives, which is told in all four Gospels,
where an incident of violence erupts as one of the disciples pulls a sword
and cuts off the ear of a servant of the high priest.

And Jesus' divine response to this knee-jerk act of violence is to say,
"Enough of this!" in Luke's Gospel (Luke 22: 49-51),

and "Put your sword back, for those who live by the sword, will die by the sword"
in Matthew's Gospel. (Matt. 26: 50-52)

I was proud of our Presbyterian General Assembly last week for taking a stand
against gun violence, and voting 85% in favor
of advocating for stricter gun control laws in our country.

I was alarmed to hear that the city of Detroit has more registered firearms
than registered voters!

I was troubled to learn that we lose 30,000 people a year to gun violence
in the United States.

And I was dismayed to read that the top-selling album last week was one called
Ultraviolence by Lana Del Rey that glorifies acts of abuse against women.

Is this our standard means of conflict resolution: to cut off an ear,
to traumatize the powerless and innocent, to end a life?

Is this the legacy that we want to leave to our children?

Is this the legacy that God wanted Abraham to leave for his galaxy of descendants?

Is this the legacy that Jesus wanted to leave for his faithful disciples?

When a young child like Sigfried reads this story to us in worship,
what do you want him to think it means? Whom do you want him to trust?

God had covenanted to be in partnership with Abraham,
and together they had covenanted to be in *creative* partnership,
not destructive partnership,

in raising children, a whole sandscape of them, who would be heirs to the covenant,
to bless and be a blessing to all peoples on the earth.

But perhaps in this covenanting, it takes the unthinkable pain of losing a child
to help both covenant partners realize that they do not desire
to be *destructive or threatening* toward the well-being of any child,
of any innocent, in the process of blessing the nations.

Perhaps that is the real test of the covenant – its outcome on the welfare of the next generation.

We believe, as Christians, that God knows the pain of the offering
in the crucifixion of God's only son, the named one, the one whom God loves.
God has bound God's self to us in child-love, in suffering child-love,
through Jesus Christ, covenanting with us to banish our worst nightmare:
the specter of the violent destruction of our children
in working to fulfill the *creative covenant* of blessing for all. So may it be. Amen.