Sunday, June 30, 2002
ABRAHAM AND ISAAC
Genesis 22:1-14

The Bible is filled with what I like to call “teaching stories.” A teaching story is one that is not necessarily historically true, but it is remembered and told over and over again because of what it teaches about your relationship to God and one another. It is remembered because it contains eternal truths. A teaching story can also give us new insight into our human interaction with God. Jesus told many teaching stories, which we call “parables.” The Hebrew Bible, or what Christians commonly call the Old Testament, contains many teaching stories. For example, the creation stories in the book of Genesis are teaching stories, as is the story of Cain killing his brother Abel, and the story of Noah and the Ark. The story of Jonah and the large fish is a powerful teaching story.

The beauty of such teaching stories is that whether or not they are historically true is irrelevant. What you are searching for is the deeper truth that the stories illustrate. That kind of search means you have to use your imagination and creativity as you read these stories and try to discover how they relate to your life today. That can be very exciting.

To understand the Bible as containing many teaching stories which are not historically true does not in any way deny the reality of God or that the Bible contains the word of God. On the contrary, these stories remind us that God, or the Holy, is real and can be experienced in a variety of ways. They also underscore the fact that whatever we say about God or the sacred is a human creation, a human response to the Holy. In addition, such stories tell you how those who told the stories saw things, not necessarily about how God sees things.

With this background in mind, let’s examine more carefully one of the most powerful — and some would say one of the most horrible — teaching stories in the Old Testament: the call by God to Abraham to kill his son Isaac as a sacrifice to God.

It’s a very short and simple story. In order to test his faith and his obedience to God, Abraham comes to believe that God has told him to take his son Isaac and kill him, and then offer his son’s body as a burnt offering to God.

Since you know how the story ends, it’s easier to hear. However, when you consider it to be a test of faith, the story only works if you assume that Abraham did not know ahead of time that God would provide a ram in the bush at the last minute as a substitute for Isaac. Otherwise, it’s a forgery, a cosmic joke where the players all know, in the words of that familiar radio exercise, “this is only a test of the emergency broadcast system. If this were an actual emergency...”

For Abraham, it is an actual emergency. It is the terrifying proposition that God would command a faithful individual to kill his son to prove his love for the very God who provided that son in the first place.

A minister colleague of mine who preached a sermon on this story titled it, “YOU’VE GOT TO BE KIDDING.” He said, “The idea that any father could ever believe that any God had commanded him to take something this precious and destroy it, and that in so doing, he was committing the ultimate act of obedience and making the ultimate sacrifice and that this was somehow pleasing to God, is an idea so ludicrous to me that it borders on the demonic.” I agree.

If you watch very many television programs or go to many movies, you know that many of today's TV programs and films contain horrible scenes of violence and evil. Yet it would be difficult to find a program or film with a story more repulsive than this one. A satanic cult? A pedophile in action? In this Bible story, you have a father who plans to commit the ultimate act of child abuse and lies to his son in the process. When Isaac says to his father, "We have the wood for the burnt offering, but where is the lamb?" Abraham answers, "Don't worry, son, the Lord will provide."

There is something out of whack about comforting a child just before you murder him. Frederick Buechner, the writer, describes the scene this way:

"Abraham didn't have the heart to tell him what was going to happen, and if Isaac guessed, he didn't have the heart to admit that he did as they trudged side by side up the steep track. A mule was loaded down with the things they needed for making the fire, but the sacrificial animal was conspicuously absent, and when Isaac asked about it, Abraham choked out an evasive answer as best he could. By the time the wood was all laid out and ready to be lit, Isaac no longer had any doubts as to what lay in store for him, and maybe the reason he didn't fight for his life was that suddenly it didn't seem to him all that much worth fighting for. He let himself be tied up and laid out on top of the wood like an unblemished lamb, and, shaking like a leaf, the old man got as far as raising the knife over his head when God spoke up at last and said he'd seen all he needed to see and Abraham could use it on a lamb instead. The lights switch off there, and the stage is returned mercifully to darkness."

Through the centuries, this teaching story has had a number of varying interpretations. Some Christians, for example, consider the sacrifice of Isaac to be a prefiguring of the sacrifice of another Father's son, in whose death and resurrection a new faith came into being. But that doesn't make any sense to me. First of all, Isaac was saved at the last minute by God's mercy, and secondly, it wasn't the God we sometimes call Father who killed Jesus.

Here's the interpretation of this teaching story that makes the most sense to me, and hopefully to you. Remember, first of all, as I mentioned before, stories like these came into being using heroes of the faith, combined with an intervention by God, to explain how things came to be the way they are and also to illustrate how our understanding of God keeps evolving, changing, and growing.

For many centuries in a variety of religious rituals, the practice of human sacrifice was an important feature. Somehow ancient people thought this would please and placate God. At some point in our evolving understanding of the nature of God, animals were substituted for human beings. It is still barbaric, of course, to kill animals and think it pleases God, but not as awful as killing human beings.

Somewhere along the way, and no one knows exactly when and how, the idea came to the religious leaders that sacrificing human beings didn't please God. But how do you explain the change? How do you pass along the new idea? How do you get support for it? How do you get it stopped? This all took place before a written language existed. What you do is construct a story using a hero and pioneer of the faith, a respected patriarch, as the main character — someone who is believed to be chosen by God. This hero, who is about to give up the most precious thing in his life, thinking it will please God, is then told by God to stop.

Horrible as this story seems to you and me, it signifies one of the pivotal changes in religious history and practice: the end of human sacrifice as a religious practice. Unfortunately, it has not ended it completely. Remember Jim Jones giving Kool-Aid mixed with cyanide to his followers, to children and adults? In his confused way of thinking, he thought he was doing God's will. And what about the suicide pilots who flew the airplanes into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon? They were practicing human sacrifice for religious reasons. They believed that killing themselves and others would somehow please God and get them a special reward. The terrorists who blow themselves up in Israel and other places and kill innocent people in the process believe the same thing. They think they are pleasing God. These terrorists are almost all young people whose parents are willing to have them sacrificed. To die for a religion is easier than to live it absolutely.

Does killing yourself or someone else, no matter the reason, ever please God? I need to tell you that, from my Christian faith perspective, even the capital punishment of a criminal does not please God. Remember in the Old Testament story of Cain, who killed his brother Abel, God commanded that no one should kill Cain for the crime. Here's the quote from the Bible: "God said, 'Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance.' And God put a mark on Cain so that no one who came upon him would kill him." (Genesis 4:15)

Thus, you see, the story of Abraham and Isaac does relate to you and me today. And it connects with you and me in other, more subtle, and metaphorical ways. Here's how Rabbi Norman Cohen, a Jewish Old Testament scholar, connects this story to you and me:

"We are all like Abraham; so involved in our outside world, our careers, interests, or principles, that we do not or cannot see that it is our child, or spouse, or parent that is bound on the altar. We are so adept at sacrificing that which is truly important to us on the altars we have erected that we may ask whether we are capable of hearing the cry of the angel before it's too late."

Remember in the story, an angel of God spoke to Abraham and told him to stop right before he was about to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham heard the message and stopped the sacrifice. But do you and I hear the angel? Do we get the message?

You have to understand sacrifice in a much broader context. This story of Abraham and Isaac wants you to ask yourself: Are you making human sacrifices out of those you love? Not all at once on some mountaintop, not killing them, but hurting them in small steps of neglect, lack of compassion, concern, or empathy?

How many fathers or mothers this week decided to work so many hours at the office, business, or factory, or be gone on business so much that they sacrificed their families on the altar of the workaholic? Can you hear the child, like Isaac, asking, "I see the house, and the babysitter, but where is Mommy or Daddy?"

How many coaches of athletic teams made up of young people in Lincoln and in other towns and cities this summer will sacrifice the innocence of their players by making it all too clear to them that the really important thing is not to learn how to play the game and enjoy it, but to win it at any cost? How many parents will end up getting into an argument or fight with the coaches or other parents because of his or her child? Then the young person, like Isaac, will be asking, "I see the playing field, I see my teammates, but where are the adults, the grownups, who are supposed to be my role models?"

How many CEOs of large corporations or other business leaders will cheat their stockholders or customers this week with so-called aggressive accounting or outright fraud, sacrificing them on the altar of greed and thus also sacrificing the trust that makes a society possible? Does no one of them hear the message of God telling them to halt their greed?

And how many religious leaders, priests, and ministers have sacrificed young boys and girls on the altar of sexual assault, and in the process also sacrificed the trust that young people and their parents have in them as leaders and in the churches they represent?

I'm very pleased that we have stopped making burnt offerings out of human beings and animals as part of our religious rituals, thinking it pleased God. That's progress. But we are still sacrificing each other in all sorts of ways. There are too many Abrahams ready to kill their Isaacs, but unlike the Abraham in the teaching story from the Bible, these modern-day Abrahams are not hearing the angel message from God telling them to stop. Amen.