

“Here I am.”
Lorraine Avenue Mennonite Church
Wichita, Kansas
July 2, 2017

Genesis 21:1-3, 22:1-14¹

¹The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised.

²Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him.

³Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him.

^{22:1}After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, ‘Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ ²He said, ‘Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt-offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.’ ³So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt-offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. ⁴On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. ⁵Then Abraham said to his young men, ‘Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.’ ⁶Abraham took the wood of the burnt-offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. ⁷Isaac said to his father Abraham, ‘Father!’ And he said, ‘Here I am, my son.’ He said, ‘The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering?’ ⁸Abraham said, ‘God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son.’ So the two of them walked on together.

⁹When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. ¹¹But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, ‘Abraham, Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ ¹²He said, ‘Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.’ ¹³And 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. ¹⁴So 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.’

One of the legacies that Mennonites have inherited from the Protestant Reformation is the idea that every believer retains in himself or herself the right to interpret Scripture as they may read it and as it may make sense to the individual believer. This may seem obvious to us today, but we should be mindful that it wasn’t always so. Before the invention of the printing press very few people possessed a copy of the Bible. Very few had the ability to read anything, let alone something as challenging as the Bible. This allowed the insistence of authorities of the Roman Catholic Church that they- and they alone – possessed the authority to interpret the Bible to go largely unchallenged until the Reformation, whose 500th anniversary we will be marking in the next couple of decades, finally came along.

I have been hearing for some years concerns about a supposed decline in biblical literacy; which supposes some past magical time when people supposedly did possess a large degree of familiarity with

¹ All Biblical citations from: New Revised Standard Version Bible. Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. 1989.

the Bible. I have to tell you I'm always a bit skeptical of talk of "the good old days". But I do think there is a basic truth to what the late George Gallup, Jr., one of the pioneers of rigorous research into how Americans live their religious lives, said in his famous essay of 1990 Americans and the Bible.² He noted "Americans revere the Bible – but, by and large, they don't read it." Certainly there are many reasons why this would be so – and I won't here spend the many hours of speculation that might require. But I do want to talk a little bit about an impulse I was not aware of in my childhood, but that I have become increasingly aware in these years of my old age as I have come to be more deeply in conversation with people about matters of the Bible.

All of us want a Bible that will for us be consistent, that will be completely free of ambiguity, that will always be a source of consolation as we understand it, that will never disturb us, that will surprise us only in expected kinds of ways, that will not present any challenges that are not easy; I am as guilty as anybody else.

The problem here, of course, is that this is not the Bible we have been given. And I think that for many of us, all of these difficulties crystallize in the story we read today; the sacrifice or not, literal or figurative, of Isaac by Abraham. It is an extremely curious story, and part of what makes it so is that it seems to have some elements of cruelty, if not outright sadism. Sarah has finally, in her old age, been able to realize one of her very fondest dreams by giving birth to a child. She and Abraham are unimaginably happy (though Abraham is troubled at this point that he doesn't know where his other child is that has been driven from the household³). Isaac seems to be all that they could wish for; a happy, healthy child who is a constant source of great joy. In the middle of this great domestic contentment the God of joy, the God of peace, the God of love comes to Abraham and says "You will take the child whom you love beyond description and who is the very center of your dear wife's life and burn him to death at a time and place of my choosing." And isn't that what we all want to hear when we ask God to show us the way? We are not told whether or not Abraham informed Sarah of this conversation; we can sympathize that he might have found this an overpoweringly forbidding thing to do. He might have feared Sarah would undertake, successfully, to talk him out of it. Except in one of the interesting contradictions that exists in this story there is some evidence that Abraham was in some debate with himself about whether or not to carry out the order. Why else would he say to his servants "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you," if it was his clear intention to come back by himself. Does Abraham himself even know what he is going to do? And what is going through poor Isaac's mind? The very center of all his trust and affirmation in the world ties him to the wood that Isaac himself has been made to carry up the mountain. And Isaac watches his father raise the knife to cut his Isaac's throat as Isaac has seen Abraham do so many times before to animals of sacrifice. In the time-honored manner of melodrama just as Abraham raises the knife to do the bloody deed an angel of God calls Abraham to which Abraham can only say "Here I am." And what does "Here I am" mean? "Where are you?" or "Where have you been?" or "Are you here to taunt me?" or "What more do you want from me?" Interestingly, though Abraham was in God's presence when God gave the command to kill Isaac; God does not appear to give the reprieve but instead sends an angel. Is it not important enough for God to personally bother with? Is God embarrassed to face Abraham? After putting Abraham and Isaac, and

² <http://members.bib-arch.org/publication.asp?PubID=BSBR&Volume=6&Issue=3&ArticleID=18>.

³ Genesis 21: 9-21.

prospectively Sarah, through so much emotional anguish and turmoil is God now going to behave as if it were just a means of amusing Himself?

These questions get to the crux of the problem that many people have with this story: the God it reveals is not very Godly. This God does not behave in ways we want God to behave. This God acts in ways we feel like we have been led to believe God will not behave. We may feel like we are in the presence of a God who jokes and lies. And this may be why conversation about the Bible amongst ourselves might be so necessary.

If the revealing of the nature of God through the word of God were a simple matter, easy to grasp and simple to understand, that could be done in a statement of perhaps a couple of pages. But what we have instead is an Old Testament consisting of 39 books, a New Testament consisting of 27 books, an Apocrypha, and uncounted volumes of commentary and research, good and bad, down through the centuries.

The Old Testament, or the Hebrew Bible, or the Tanakh, as our Jewish friends call it; is not an A-B-C-D-E instruction manual. It is a testimony by a people over many generations and many events of coming to be in the presence of God and coming over time to acquire an understanding of God. God is not always understood the same way. Our grasp of an ethical God, a lawful God, a loving God are all understandings that develop within the Bible. The Book of Genesis, the larger context in which we must understand the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac, does in many places quite obviously feature a God that is not the God we commonly imagine. In the story of the Garden of Eden, God can't find Adam and Eve when he goes looking for them. God commissions prophets who urge the people to commit awful and ghastly acts. In an act of very human frustration God destroys the living world He has created.

The first readers of the Book of Genesis, which is commonly thought to have appeared somewhere around the time of the Babylonian exile, would have wrestled with such contradictions just as we do. They had their own questions about the nature of God, just as we do. In that light I would submit that the real conversation taking place between Abraham and God here is not Abraham saying to God "I am your obedient servant even to the point of being willing to kill my own child," and God responding "Yes, you are an obedient servant as you have shown by being willing to kill your own child." In my mind the real conversation here is Abraham saying to God "I am your obedient servant even to the point of being willing to kill my own child," and God responds "By which you have come to know that you serve a God who would never desire for you that you kill your own child." Abraham and Sarah and Isaac are having an experience of gaining insight into the nature of God; a God who is not visible but ever present, a God who can be completely loved but not completely known, a God who will be the final refuge from pain however surrounded by pain we might be. The Old Testament returns to these ideas again and again; as the New Testament later will as it goes in another direction; because these ideas must be learned and relearned again and again in each generation in each heart. In what we can think have been less dramatic ways, all of us have at some point been Abraham, and Sarah, and Isaac. Each of us has known, or will know, being separated from something or someone we love, being a disappointment to ourselves and others, having dreams stubbornly refuse to come true. Whenever we pick up a Bible, we embrace the promise that is such times God will remind us of what God truly is, and we will have the wisdom, the spirit, and the power to be able to respond "Here I am."

Pete Emery