

*June 26, 2011*

# ***“Did I Get That Right, God?”***

*Rev. Dr. Sharon Rhodes-Wickett*

# Did I Get That Right, God?

Genesis 22:1-14; Matthew 10:40-42

Pent 6 A

Sermon by Sharon Rhodes-Wickett  
June 26, 2011, Claremont UMC

I kept the reading from Genesis until after the children left for Sunday School. It would be cruel to read the story of the Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac without talking with the children about it. I took the easy way out!

Before I read the text, I want to say a few things about it.

First, the concept of child sacrifice was commonplace of West Semitic religion. There was the belief that all life comes from God, and all life belongs to God, and that the first of any new life must be offered back to God to honor life's origin.

We see the traditions of offering the first fruits of the harvest in sacrifice to God (*eg. Exodus 34:26*), and of offering the first of the lambs and the kids — “all that first opens the womb” — in sacrifice (*Exodus 13:12*).

There are indications in the Hebrew Scriptures that this sacrifice of the first life extended also to human children among some of Israel's neighbors — although to be sure it has been argued that these references are really little more than anti-foreigner propaganda.

Scholar Paul Nancarrow writes,

“It is suggestive to read this story of Abraham and Isaac as the etiological myth explaining the origin of the tradition to make a sacrifice on behalf of — but not *of* — the firstborn son. Abraham in the story is trapped in an unendurable dilemma: he must honor God who gave life to the child of promise, the one neither he nor Sarah could have hoped for on their own, and that means sacrifice; yet if he gives the child of promise to God in sacrifice, then he dishonors and destroys the very promise he intends to honor.

“Two differing ideals of religious duty are at war in Abraham, and he can see no way to resolve the dilemma; and perhaps that accounts for the affective “deadness,” the strangely muted tone, of the entire narrative.

“It is only when God presents a third alternative — the ram stuck in the thicket — that Abraham perceives a way to honor God *and* save Isaac; and that third alternative is the one that became part of the religious tradition of Abraham's descendants.”<sup>i</sup>

The story also illustrates the dangers of interpreting Scripture literally. You see, the story could also have been intended to show the foolishness of child sacrifice... rather than condoning it.

Hear now the reading from Genesis 22:1-14.

I don't want to have to think about Abraham holding his sharpened knife high in the air, apparently willing to plummet it into his son's chest at the mere word of God. I don't want to deal with a God who would make a promise and then seemingly take it back. I don't want to think about a spiritual ancestor that could be so blind in his obedience to God.

God crept into Abraham and Sarah's lives in their old age, promising them children they only dreamed of, and children they mourned for never birthing. The story says that God whispered into ancient ears that were never sure of what they heard, that they would have a son.

Sarah and Abraham laughed at such a good joke. This God was pretty funny. This God told a good one. How about another one, God? Got any other good jokes?

'Yes,' said God, I've got another good one...not only will you have a son at your ancient age, but you will have so many ancestors – well, look at the sky – you see how many stars there are? That's how many ancestors you will have.

Well, Sarah and Abraham loved a good joke, and they thought this was pretty funny. God did too.

And so ancient belly swelled with life, unbelievable life, and Abraham and Sarah had a son. They named him Isaac, which means "one laughs."

Years passed, I don't know how many.

But Isaac was older...old enough to carry wood. The story says that voice came again, that voice of God that whispers in ancient ears. This time it wasn't so funny: 'You know that child you had when you were really old...the one you love with every fiber of your being...the one who is supposed to carry on after you, the one who made you laugh... I want you to offer him as a burnt offering.'

Abraham didn't answer. He didn't argue, and we know he could because he had before. He bargained God all over the place.

Abraham! (*we think*) Don't take this lying down! Talk God out of this. But he didn't. He didn't laugh, either, thinking it was another one of God's funny jokes, for it wasn't. He didn't cry – He didn't respond with any words at all. He just did what he understood God told him to do.

What to make of this story! How hard it is to figure out what this story meant to our mothers and fathers who lived in ancient time with other ways of perceiving the world and God.

I want to rail at God for being so unfair, so unjust. I would like to cut this story out of Genesis...you wouldn't mind if I did, would you? You probably don't like this story either.

But just the same, there is something that draws me to this story. There are deep waters that beckon me to dive in and see the murky depths.

Easy explanations that keep God safe and tame leave me unsatisfied.

Explanations that say that Abraham knew all along that God wouldn't make him do it, just sound trite or dismissive.

Explanations that say God demands that kind of deadly obedience stand in stark contrast to a God who creates life and laughter.

What to do? Where to go with what Phyllis Tribble calls - this text of terror?

While climbing the mountain, Isaac asked his father where the offering was. Abraham answered, "God will provide..." The Hebrew word translated 'provide' is actually the word 'see': "God will see it, the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.'

One scholar says another way to understand the word is "seeing before." God sees *before* Abraham, which really is what provision is, isn't it?

Not that it's crystal-ball fortune telling, it is God seeing what is needed before Abraham sees it, or of God seeing what Abraham does not see.

We, the listeners to the story were told this was a test. But Abraham wasn't told that.

Who was being tested? Abraham or God? Who was being faithful to whom? How were the results of the test going to be used?

I wonder if the point of the story was that Abraham was testing God. If child sacrifice was not required, maybe Abraham was testing God to see if it were really true! What would God do?

It doesn't matter what religion you follow, there are texts that are misunderstood. There are texts, when taken out of context, are murderous and offensive. It is at least true for Jews, Christians and Muslims. There are stories, passed on for many generations, that seem to require that we do violence

to one another. If we don't understand the context from which the story came, we can come to misinformed conclusions.

But let's see if we can apply this story to our current reality today.

We could cite child trafficking as an example of sacrificing children... but the disconnect there is that no one is quoting scripture to justify such abhorrent behavior.

I have one for you: the trial this past week of the Rev. Amy DeLong.

Amy DeLong is a United Methodist Elder in Wisconsin. She was brought up on trial because she officiated at a Holy Union Ceremony for a Lesbian couple. Rev. DeLong has chosen to not lie about her ministry.

She listed the Holy Union in her Charge Conference report, and subsequently was brought up on charges for violating the Book of Discipline.

It seems to me this is very much like the story of Abraham and his son. By proceeding to sacrifice his son, Abraham was testing an understanding of God.

By following her pastoral heart, the Rev. DeLong tested God's compassionate love. And we must distinguish God's compassionate love from the Book of Discipline, the rules of our church (although it would be nice if there were a stronger connection). Our rules are unjust, causing deep pain for so many... both gay and straight. More and more of us are willing to choose God's compassion over outdated and misguided rules in our Book of Discipline.

Are we any different from those who called for child sacrifice? We cringe at Abraham when he raises the knife. Our Discipline calls for the sacrifice of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered, queer and questioning. I would rather violate the Book of Discipline than the teachings of Jesus which were inclusive and which violated the customs and teachings of his day. That's why Jesus got into so much trouble... he violated the practices of his religion.

Those who prosecute Rev. DeLong do so in the name of God.

God's creative Holy Spirit enabled a third way out of no way in the trial of Amy DeLong. They could have seized her orders, but instead the jury came up with the following verdict for the trial. They found her guilty. There was no other response. She herself stated her own guilt in disobeying the Discipline.

But the verdict did not seize her orders.

Rather the verdict is as follows:

- 1) 20 day suspension for discernment
- 2) Participate with the bishop and complainant in discernment
- 3) Initiate a written document for clergy to outline procedures to help resolve issues that harm the clergy covenant, create an adversarial spirit or lead to future clergy trials.
- 4) Send draft to Board of Ordained Ministry by January 2012
- 5) After BOOM review, redraft and submit to the Wisconsin Clergy Session at 2012 Annual Conference for their action. <sup>ii</sup>

Some view this verdict as punitive and unfair. Knowing what they could have done, I believe the verdict holds grace and promise... much like the story of Abraham when God showed him a third way.

This verdict allows for dialogue and further growth among the participants. I think we need to talk about our clergy covenant, which I believe is already broken. It allows an opportunity for people to be honest about their understanding of God at work in the world.

On Amy DeLong's website is a song by Holly Near. The lyrics read:

*I am open and I am willing  
To be hopeless would seem so strange  
It dishonors those who go before us  
So lift me up to the light of change*

*There is hurting in my family  
There is sorrow in my town  
There is panic in the nation  
There is wailing the whole world round*

*May the children see more clearly  
May the elders be more wise  
May the winds of change caress us  
Even though it burns our eyes*

*Give me a mighty oak to hold my confusion  
Give me a desert to hold my fears  
Give me a sunset to hold my wonder  
Give me an ocean to hold my tears <sup>iii</sup>*

If you want to read more, go to [LoveonTrial.org](http://LoveonTrial.org).

We are disciples of the One who said “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”

The reading from Genesis is not a prescription for how we are to behave, but rather confronts the ways in which we invoke God’s name to support what we think is right.

God finds another way... God chooses what gives life... life abundant.

God whispers in our ears, and we lean forward to discern how God is showing us a third way.

---

<sup>i</sup> [www.processandfaith.org](http://www.processandfaith.org)

<sup>ii</sup> [United Methodist News Service](http://www.unitedmethodistnews.org) reporter Heather Hahn and photographer Mike DuBose are covering the trial and will post coverage here as well as on the [UMNS Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/UMNS) page and [Flickr](https://www.flickr.com/photos/umns/).  
[http://umnsfieldjournal.blogspot.com/2011\\_06\\_01\\_archive.html](http://umnsfieldjournal.blogspot.com/2011_06_01_archive.html)

<sup>iii</sup> [www.hollynear.com](http://www.hollynear.com)

Other sources consulted:

The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. 1, Abingdon Press

Karen Armstrong, In the Beginning, A New Interpretation of Genesis, Ballantine Pub. 1996

Robert M. Seltzer, Devar Torah on the Akedah, 5761, [www.havuratshalom.org](http://www.havuratshalom.org)