

Something Beautiful

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 22:1-14; Psalm 13; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42

2 July 2023

Moments ago, we read one of the most difficult texts in the Bible: the binding of Isaac. Biblical scholar Ellen Davis notes that “The Scriptures are chock-full of embarrassing, offensive, and internally contradictory texts” (177). What do we do when we encounter such stories?

I’d like to suggest that we encounter the difficult texts of the Bible with a hermeneutic of charity. In other words, that we read these texts patiently and full of hope, expecting that even in a story where Abraham is tested with taking the life of his son, we can meet there the loving God we see clearly in Jesus.

This morning I will offer three aids to help us read this text with a hermeneutic of charity. The first two aids I’m borrowing from Ellen Davis, Richard Hays, and others from their book *The Art of Reading Scripture*, and then I’ll offer one additional aid.

The first aid is that the Bible is about God, not us. That's not to say that we're not involved, but it's not a self-help book. The Bible is primarily about God's action to save and heal our broken world. One of the questions we'll need to ask is what might Genesis 22 tell us about God?

Second, reading the Bible is an art, not a science. This is the main premise of the book, *The Art of Reading Scripture*. If it's true that reading the Bible is an art, and I'm inclined to think it is, then the bad news is that reading Scripture well is hard to do. The good news, in the words of Davis and Hays, is that "Like every other form of art, reading Scripture has the potential for creating something beautiful." I love that, *creating something beautiful*. They go on, "Interpretations of Scripture are not just right and wrong, although at times such categories are useful and necessary. But perhaps ultimately a more adequate way of judging our readings is the way we judge works of art – according to standards of beauty. To what extent do our readings reveal the intricacy, the wondrous quality of what the biblical writers call . . . 'the works of the LORD'? To what extent do they draw us toward something, a way of being that is – to use Paul's language – more 'lovely,' more 'gracious,' more 'excellent,' 'noble,' 'worthy of praise' (Phil 4:8)?" (xvi). That's the second question we'll ask this morning: how might our reading of Genesis 22 create something beautiful, something that gives witness to the gracious works of the Lord?

Finally, reading the Bible well requires humility, community, and the Holy Spirit. We can't do it on our own. The Ethiopian eunuch knew this. The author of 2 Peter acknowledges there are some things in Paul's letters and other Scriptures that are "hard to understand." And Jesus demonstrates this on the road to Emmaus when he began "with Moses and all the prophets" and "interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures" (Luke 24:27). It's important that we humbly acknowledge that we need help to read the Bible well, and even then, we may not get it right. It's not our job to make challenging texts more palatable or offer the definitive interpretation of anything. Our job is to humbly and prayerfully attend to our community and the Holy Spirit to make sense of what God is revealing to us in Scripture.

We need help to read Scripture well. We need conversation with other Christians and we need the scholarship of people who have studied Scripture thoroughly through manuscript studies and the original languages, through historical and cultural contexts, and a host of other interpretive tools. We need Bible commentaries, books, and study guides. We also need to listen to the community of the great cloud of witnesses. We aren't the first people reading these texts – what can we learn from Christians who have lovingly pored over these same stories for nearly two thousand years? The Holy Spirit helps us make sense of all this, giving us wisdom, helping us discern the truth about God's love for us and all creation. So the third question we'll ask this morning is how can we be more humble and Spirit-guided in our reading of the Bible?

To recap, our three aids today, as we face the difficult text of Genesis 22, are that the Bible is about God; reading the Bible is an art; and we need humility, community, and the Spirit to read it well. Each of these aids will help us read Genesis 22 with a hermeneutic of charity, as we address the three questions I've just laid out.

Question one: what might Genesis 22 tell us about God? One reason Genesis 22 is a difficult text is it appears to present God as a violent god who demands child sacrifice, or at the very least, as a god who uses child sacrifice as a cruel test of loyalty. This sense is compounded by Abraham's unquestioning and seemingly apathetic, "Here I am" responses, first to God, then to his son, and finally to the angel. Abraham's acceptance of the test is further complicated by what appears to be his deceitful responses, first to the two traveling companions, and then to his own son when he asked where the lamb was for the burnt offering. A plain reading, or literal reading, of this text presents a god who is willing to risk Isaac's life to test Abraham, and a servant in Abraham who doesn't seem surprised by the troubling demand.

But what if the literal reading is misleading? The author of Hebrews appears to think it is and offers instead an interpretation of this text that presents us an altogether different view of God and Abraham. Here is how he interprets this difficult story:

“By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom he had been told, ‘It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you.’ He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—and, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back” (Heb 11:17-19).

Here we see a different God and Abraham altogether. Here we are reminded of the promise God made Abraham that he would be a blessing to the nations, and that this blessing would directly involve Abraham’s son, Isaac. We are also reminded that God can raise people from the dead. What’s more, while God did not in the end receive the sacrifice of Abraham’s son, God did allow *God’s* only beloved son to offer his life for us, who God vindicated by raising Jesus from the dead. So the God we begin to see in this story is a God who sacrificed *God’s* self for our salvation, and conquered the grave in the resurrection.

The author of Hebrews also presents us with a different view of Abraham. Through this reading, we see an Abraham that does not blindly receive God's violent test, but rather, a man of faith who "was ready to offer up his only son...[because] he considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead." On this reading, Abraham doesn't deceive his travel companions or son because he believes that somehow, someday, he will return with Isaac and God will provide the lamb needed for their worship. Abraham trusted that God would keep God's promises and provide everything he needed for faithfulness. Abraham believed God would come through no matter what.

This begs our second question: how might our reading of Genesis 22 create something beautiful, something that gives witness to the gracious works of the Lord?

The reading from Hebrews not only helps us see God more clearly, but also helps us see a beautiful reading of this challenging text. God is faithful. God keeps God's promises. God provides, and God has the power to save, even beyond the limits of our imaginations. Death is not the end of the story because God *raises the dead*. That's beautiful.

And there's more beauty to behold when we apply these works of the Lord to our reading from Romans. Here God's resurrecting power is on full display through the Christian practice of baptism. That's the context of our passage today. The reason why sin no longer has dominion is because through baptism, the Christians in Rome have been baptized into Christ's death. This is one of the clearest articulations of baptism in the Bible. Here Paul says, "Therefore we were buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:4). In baptism, we die with Christ so that we can rise with Christ. Through baptism we enter a whole new reality of being: we are in the most real way, "born again."

Part of our being born again is being set free from Sin. For Paul, Sin is personified. It's a force that has us by the throat. But Christ defeated Sin. And we too can defeat Sin by being united with Christ through baptism.

Paul reminds us here in Romans that the wages of sin is death. By conquering sin, Christ sets us free from sin and death. By uniting to Christ through baptism, we conquer sin and death too, and so receive the gift of life with God forever. This is one way of understanding the gracious works of the Lord.

St. Irenaeus described sin and death as the “twin chains” of the devil. When Jesus conquered the devil, he broke those chains. This is why the author of Hebrews can say that “figuratively speaking, [Abraham] did receive [Isaac] back.” The idea here is that by offering Isaac to God, Abraham was offering his son a kind of baptism.

Now we’re ready to ask, how can we be humble and Spirit-guided in our reading of the Bible? The first answer is this: be open to the possibility there is more going on in the text. The Bible is like a Pixar film: it operates on different levels and addresses a wide range of audiences and ages. If Pixar can work in this multi-varied way, so can God. And wouldn’t we expect just that of the Scripture that reveals the God of the universe?

That the Bible can work on many levels is an invitation to us to slow down, be humble, be patient, and be open to the reality that there is more going on than immediately meets the eye. This means many things, but one thing it surely means is that there is not a single definitive interpretation for any text. There’s always more, because God is always more. Another implication of Scripture’s many levels of meaning is that the Bible invites us to be less concerned about being certain and more committed to being faithful. We are faithful when we trust that God will keep God’s promises and that God has the power to save beyond our wildest dream. God can be trusted, and because of this, we can faithfully follow God, wherever God leads us, even if it is to the cross.

Today's gospel lesson comes from the fourth of Jesus's five major discourses in Matthew's Gospel. The way Matthew tells the story is that Jesus is like a new Moses who delivers five major teachings, beginning with the Sermon on the Mount. Today's reading is the conclusion of the Missionary Discourse, where Jesus teaches his disciples about coming persecutions. Just a few verses earlier, Jesus famously states, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword." This is yet another text that invites our humility and hopefulness.

While a hurried reading might lead one to think that Jesus is wielding a sword of violence, or at the least, his disciples are, Jesus's teaching makes it clear that the sword is being wielded by *others* – family members even – against Jesus's followers. Persecution is not for the faint of heart and here Jesus is preparing his disciples, and us, to trust him – even in the face of death. We find the courage and hope to follow Jesus to the cross as a community who receives God's promises, promises like the one we read in verse 40: "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." Through our baptism, we are united with God the Father through the Son by the Holy Spirit. Our reward is life with God forever, but we need to continue to trust that God is able to fulfill this promise even in the most challenging tests.

Today we are invited to be tested by God, like Abraham. God keeps God's promises and gives us everything we need to be faithful even in our most difficult situations. Through baptism we are united with Christ who has conquered sin, death, and the devil, and this gracious work makes it possible for us to live as a community of humility, hope, and love. We do not need to have all the puzzles of the Bible solved because we can embrace God's promises as God's children who know God can be trusted. We can pass any test together with the help of the Holy Spirit, knowing that God is able to raise even us from the dead. Thanks be to God.