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First, let's acknowledge the elephant in the room. This story of the binding for sacrifice of Isaac is really hard to hear. The action that is contemplated in this story is horrible. That it is God who orders Abraham to offer human sacrifice of his son makes it sickeningly worse. Who is this God who commands Abraham to do such a repulsive thing? Each of us probably has his or her own picture of who God is and what God is like. They may all be different, but I'm pretty sure none of us pictures a God who calls for human sacrifice.

Those who originally heard this story would, however, have it very differently. Those who originally heard this story were surrounded by gods who called for and cultures which practiced human sacrifice. This was true at the time of Abraham, and it was true for century after century after century after the time of Abraham. It seemed that nearly everyone around them but them had gods who demanded that children be sacrificed to them. But not Israel. Israel's God was different. Very different.

The difference shows up right from the beginning. We don't notice it because we live in a world very unlike the world in which Israel lived. Israel's neighbors had creation stories, too. In many of them, maybe in most of them, certainly in *all* the other cultures' creation stories about which I know, creation is a violent act. Creation takes place when one god defeats, usually kills another and out of the dead god's body creates the world. Israel's creation story is different because Israel's God is different. In Israel's creation story the act of creation is a peaceful one. God creates by speaking. God creates by bringing order out of chaos. God creates by bringing balance and harmony between night and day, air, land, and sea, male and female. And it is all good. That's the background for hearing and understanding this story of the binding of Isaac.

Still, it *is* a disturbing story. So let's wrestle with it. “21:1 The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. 2 Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. 3 Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him.” God promises an heir to Abraham and Sarah when God calls Abraham. That's back in chapter 11. Year after year after year goes by before finally in chapter 21 Sarah bears a son. Along the way as the years pass and Abraham and Sarah grow old with no child born, Abraham and Sarah, naturally, have their doubts. After years of waiting, God seems all promise and no action. And then, finally, “Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age.”

That's chapter 21. Chapter 22 begins this way, “22:1 After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 2 He 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.” Rabbis looking at this text wonder why God doesn't just say, “Take Isaac,” but says, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love.” And these rabbis speculate that the conversation may have gone something like this:

“Abraham!” Over here.” “Take you son.” “I have two sons; did you forget about Ishmael born through the slave woman Hagar?” “Take your only son.” “I have two.” “Take Isaac, the one that you love.”

Why does Abraham do as commanded? It’s not like Abraham has never argued with God. It’s not like Abraham has never haggled with God. Why doesn’t he do so here? What has changed in Abraham?

This text pushes us and pushes us hard to ask ourselves, “Who is this God in whom I believe. Can I really trust this God with my life and all I hold dear?” The Scripture says this is God testing Abraham. You’ve been tested, too. You have had times, probably will have times, when you face devastating loss, when you wonder about God’s promises, when you wonder where God is in all this. In some really important ways this strange story is also your story.

So how do you answer the questions this text is asking of you? Who is the God in whom you believe? Can you trust this God with your life and all you hold dear?

I don’t go in for glib, easy answers. But I will note two things. One, I wonder if Abraham, after all those years of wrestling with God, knew something. Abraham tells the men who are with him, “Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.” Did you catch that? *We* will come back to you. Is Abraham lying? Or does he know something about this God in whom he believes?

Second, while I don’t think it’s helpful to go looking for Jesus under every rock in the Old Testament, it’s pretty hard not to see Jesus in this story. Mt. Moriah is mentioned only one other time in the Old Testament. It’s where Solomon builds his Temple, the site of countless sacrifices. It’s where Jesus, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, is condemned to die. I think it was the Jewish theologian Martin Buber who said, “The difference between Judaism and Christianity is that in Judaism God asks a man to sacrifice his only son, and in Christianity it is God who sacrifices his only son.” Just so.