

***The Killer Text? - Sermon Based on Genesis 22:1-14***  
by David Hindman on Sunday, June 26, 2011

As a United Methodist I respect and admire John Wesley, our spiritual forebear. But he could be a little loopy. For example when Mr. Wesley sought divine guidance sometimes he'd open the Bible at random, close his eyes and put his finger on a text, which reminds me of a joke. A pastor seeking godly direction decides if this worked for Wesley it should be useful. The pastor opens the Bible with closed eyes, puts a finger on a text and reads, "Judas went out and hanged himself." That can't be right. Close the Bible. Close the eyes. Open the Bible and place a finger. "Go thou and do likewise." No, no, let's try once more. Eyes and Bible closed, Bible opened, finger placed. "Do quickly what you have to do."

Scripture can be a dodgy thing if not read wisely. A danger with scripture is to read it and not pay attention to context or background or what comes before and after a particular story. Today's Old Testament story is a case in point. Every now and again we read a horrifying story of someone killing their child and claiming God told them to do so. They can turn to this story to show God can ask a parent to do such a thing. It's a killer text, both literally and figuratively. It's terrifyingly troubling and God seems monstrous. This is good news?

Let's put this into context. Abraham's story encompasses more than a dozen chapters of Genesis, beginning in chapter 12. Seemingly out of nowhere God calls Abram and wife Sarah to leave behind his homeland and his family – his security and identity - and go to God knows where. God promises land, greatness, blessing, and children – which is pretty remarkable since Abram is childless and 75 and Sarah is past menopause. Incredibly, Abram and Sarah leave home with nothing more than God's word. For the next 20+ years, Abram and Sarah follow God's lead. Sometimes the old couple doubt God's reliability and take matters into their own hands. But time and again God promises to be as good as God's word. And most days, Abraham trusts and believes God and becomes God's friend. They have such a strong bond of trust that one time Abraham dares to argue fiercely with God. Not many people are bold enough to call out the Almighty. But Abraham and God are tight and with God's reputation for fairness on the line, Abraham's advice changes God's mind. Pretty impressive.

Eventually with one foot in the grave Sarah and Abraham find their other foot in the maternity ward. When Abraham is 99, Isaac is born. Isaac's name means laughter and at last joy and gladness come to the old folks. God is a promise keeper. Trustworthy. Faithful provider – even when it seems improbable or impossible. But then God is like that.

And now we come to this story. By now Abraham has every reason to trust God. God never betrays or fails him but acts only with Abraham's best interests at heart. So God calls, "Abraham!" And instead of hiding like Adam in the Garden, Abraham quickly replies, "Here I am!" Then comes that awful demand, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love..." And Abraham immediately starts this journey of faith as quickly and obediently as when he set out in chapter 12. Then Abraham left behind his past. Now on the journey to a place God will again show Abraham, Abraham prepares to give up his future. All that's left is to live in the moment obey and trust God no matter what.

Without that background Abraham seems utterly mad and God appears completely demonic. Who could do such a thing? What kind of cruel god could ask it? The horror is so overwhelming that we can miss clues of hope and grace right in front of our eyes. First, we listeners to the story and God know something crucially important. This is a test. Abraham doesn't know but God has no intention of Isaac actually being sacrificed. But God needs to know if Abraham really trusts God and is himself trustworthy. Why? Because God's plan for the salvation and healing of the whole creation depends on Abraham and his descendants. It is no small thing to be God's primary instrument for repairing the world and God needs

someone who is 100% reliable. God needs to know if Abraham's up to the task. Does Abraham just talk the talk of trust, or will he walk the walk? Now that he has the prized child, will Abraham walk away and take home the gift or keep trusting the Giver? God really doesn't know, but needs to know. Is Abraham a stand-up guy or will God have start over if Abraham balks and fails this test? Everything hangs in the balance.

We're tempted to run from this Old Testament God to the New Testament God of grace and gentleness. That God wouldn't put us to tests, right? Except Jesus teaches us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation. Do not put us to the test." This may trouble or terrify us, but God is God and we are not. God is absolutely free to test to see what we're made of and whether our faith is real or we're just blowing smoke. Scripture tells us that God never gives a test greater than we can bear. Remember Abraham passes his test. But testing is part of faith and discipleship. Daily our discipleship is tested – will we cheat on a test, on our taxes, on our spouse? Will we forgive our enemies? What if Osama bin Laden is God's test to see if we will forgive those who wish us harm? Will we show love and compassion to the hungry poor to the point of sacrificing luxuries in order to mend the world with blessing? Will we hold onto them as the key to our future or because we think they're ours to use as we want, or put them on the altar?

Jesus said we can't serve both God and security – after all, that's what money is for us. Isaac was Abraham's security, his future. And God wanted to know if Abraham was going to cling to his security or to God. We know what let's us feel safe and secure. God tests us – is In God We Trust true or just a motto? Abraham's test is ours. And it's a matter of life and death.

Here's another clue of hope and grace. When Abraham and Isaac leave the servant and donkey for the journey's last leg, Abraham says something very important, "We will come back to you." Abraham doesn't know how it's going to happen but he trusts Isaac will return with him. We hear that hope in Abraham's words, too, "God himself will provide." Abraham trusts totally that if God can turn dried up old people in parents God can provide new life again. He doesn't know how. All he knows is that God is faithful and has never betrayed or failed him.

Jesus has that faith in the Garden the night before the cross. Jesus agonizes and prays not to be tested. But ultimately he says "Thy will be done," and trusts God to bring hope out of despair and life out of death. But only one who goes to the mountain or the cross in faith knows the gift and the life on the other side.

There's a story about a woman noticing her neighbor put up a tightrope in his yard and watching him practice walking it day after day.

She learns he plans to walk across Niagara Falls and is impressed by his determination, persistence and dedication. He masters the rope then adds a wheelbarrow, then a load of bricks. She's impressed and tells everyone. The big day arrives; she's there to watch and celebrate. Her neighbor looks pensively at the falls so she goes over to encourage him. "Do you really think I can do it?" "Absolutely! I have total faith in you." "Great! You're my person! Get in the wheelbarrow!"

God's friendship sometimes brings terror and trauma. But the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jesus says, "Get in the wheelbarrow" and trust we're in strong and reliable hands. The journey is wild and sometimes beyond our comprehension, but it's never dull. Blessing and life still come to those who dare to jump into the care of this mysterious and inscrutable God and along the way we see and experience things only the faithful can truly know, thanks be to God.