

The Trickster God

We heard read this morning the Old Testament story from Genesis 22, where God tells Abraham to take Isaac up the mountain and sacrifice him as a burnt offering. And without argument, Abraham gathers Isaac, the wood, the fire and the knife. Abraham gets as far as binding Isaac on the altar and picking up the knife, when God stops him, saying that he now knows that Abraham fears him and withholds nothing—not even his son, Isaac.

That’s the story, but often the real story is what is going on inside of us—the emotions that are elicited, the framework we have for understanding and interpreting, and the conclusions we make. If we have a strong negative reaction to something, we usually want to quickly resolve it or dismiss it because it makes us so uncomfortable. I chose this scripture passage this morning because I thought I had some insights to share that could be helpful to anyone who, like me, finds this story disturbing.

My message this morning is this: that which disturbs us may be the very thing we need to lean into to discover and uncover our fears and fallacies, to find healing, and to be set free to live from love rather than from fear. A “story” like this one can be the vehicle for making discoveries and changes that help us grow in faith and be free to be the person we want to be.

We recently got cable television at home. I have discovered the cooking show, “Chopped.” It is a competition that starts off with 4 chefs each opening a basket to find 4 ingredients with which they then have 20 minutes to fashion into an appetizer. They are judged on creativity, presentation, and taste. One of the chefs is cut—chopped—after the judging, and three of them go into a second round with a new basket of different ingredients to make an entrée. They are again judged and another chef is chopped from the competition. The remaining

two go into the final round, a new basket, with new ingredients and they have 30 minutes to create a dessert.

Sometimes there will be a strange ingredient and one chef will say that she doesn't know what it is and has no idea what to do with it, filling her with dread. And the chef next to her will say she spent 6 years in a remote village somewhere and this was a staple, so she is excited to find it in the basket, she knows exactly what to do with it. The same ingredient produces 2 different responses.

At various times in my life, I have opened the basket of the Abraham and Isaac story to ponder the ingredients inside. When I first really started paying attention to this story long ago, I tried to make something out of what I found in my basket. When I opened it, I saw an awful test, a perception of the Will of God as something you probably don't want to do; an obedient Abraham even to the point of being willing to kill his son; and a Trickster God who toys with his people.

The only dish I could see to make was a theology that the will of God is something awful you don't want to do, therefore a test of your devotion to God. It's bad enough that God gives and takes away—blessed be the name of the Lord—but this God gives, takes away, oops, not really. Gotcha, Abraham! Just kidding. This is a Trickster God. Tricksters may be entertaining and amusing, but they are not easy to trust, nor should you.

But the whole point of the story, as I was taught for many years, is to trust God. I was afraid of what the story meant because if I was supposed to be like Abraham, and I felt fear and distrust, I would surely fail this test. There was no way I was going to come out looking good. I dismissed this story as untenable—unpalatable. I chopped myself from the competition, closed up my basket and walked away.

When I went into labor with our second child—for some reason I can't fully explain—I picked that time to wonder if God was testing my faith. I thought if I were trusting God, I would have peace and calm—and be assured of a good outcome. I wasn't at all peaceful, I was scared, and I had no idea if the outcome would be good. In fact my fear was probably contributing to my stalled labor, so I was also to blame for that. I was failing the test of showing I had faith. As I reflected on this experience through the weeks following Amanda's safe and healthy birth, I discovered that though I professed and said I trusted a good and loving God, I carried in the marrow of my bones this Trickster God with whom I had to be always on guard.

I shared with my Bible study group about my sadness, fear that I couldn't trust God, and the sense of failure and confusion over God's will. They offered to pray for me. I lay back on Velda Simmons' couch and I braced for the kind gentle reprimand from God that said, “Yes, you failed, but I love you anyway, though you are a disappointment. Sigh.” Instead, when I closed my eyes, I sensed that God was weeping, being with me in my sorrow and sense of failure and confusion. Without judgment, just with me.

Many years ago I asked my husband Bob what he thought of this story of Abraham and Isaac. He told me that the people of that time practiced child sacrifice, believing that was what their gods demanded. The point of the story, he thought, was God putting an end to the practice of child sacrifice. That sounded good, congruent with the God I believed in. It was good enough to put this story away on a positive note, though I still felt a little uneasy that there might be more to it than that.

When I discovered the prayer practice of lectio divina and the Ignatian practice of putting yourself in the story, I entered what for me was a time of discovery and intimacy with God. I began to experience some freedom from fear. Later I found a spiritual director. Then I began a

three-year spiritual formation program at the Benedictine monastery in Atchison, Kansas. The first weekend of the program, our teacher was Sr. Irene (PhD in Old Testament) and her topic was covenant, tracing the history of God's covenants with His people. Irene talked about this story of Abraham being willing to sacrifice Isaac in obedience to God, placing God above all else. I sat there and felt the upheaval within me. That basket of food items was suddenly before me again. I couldn't get away from the fact that this story was about God testing Abraham. Abraham trusts, obeys and passes the test, and I just feel dread. How could I reconcile this picture of God with the God of Jesus, and with my experience of God accepting me and loving me?

I told Irene the next day—I meant to use my intellectual, slightly defiant voice, but it was instead my choked up, tearful voice—that I didn't like this story; that I had made peace with it by understanding that it's purpose was in God's ending child sacrifice. I told her that my journey with Jesus had been one of being set free and I didn't want to give up my freedom. Irene said, "No, no, no. Don't give up your freedom. But do wrestle with the story." And then she went on with the rest of class. I sat there outwardly trying to compose myself, but inwardly stunned. This was not what I expected. I expected to be told to trust; to have faith, or even to be chided for wanting to argue with the story, for not being obedient like Abraham. But Sr. Irene had simply invited me to see that if the story was that disturbing to me, lean into it. Dig here; here is where the treasure is. Don't miss it because the story repels you. Precisely because it does repel, dig here.

I spent the next month "wrestling" with it, trying to make sense of this story in order to write about it in the reflection paper I was required to write. I worked to resolve my issues with this passage. Why was Abraham so compliant with God's demand—and I will share one of the

comments Bob made on my copy: or at least, what he perceived to be God's command, according to someone who wrote the story down, several centuries later.

Why did Abraham go along this? I mean, really, there must be some reason other than he "had faith." Because if that really is the answer then I'm back in the corner of having to trust a God I can't trust. How was I to resolve these conflicting concepts of God?

I decided to work on Abraham, to explain him. I thought maybe he was representative of a stage of development in the evolution of humankind. He was primitive man, maybe a 2-year old with simplistic, unquestioning trust. Sr. Irene had said Abraham probably had many gods, and most likely the main one was a moon god because of the place he lived. The gods were of a certain place, so when people moved around, they changed gods. When God called Abraham, he was changing everything—many gods to one; rather than a stationary god, this God traveled with Abraham; and now this God was ending child sacrifice. Abraham had some major paradigm shifts going on.

Close to the end of the month and the due date for the reflection paper, I was musing on all this, knowing I was working very hard to avoid the central problem with this story, that I just didn't like the character of God and couldn't yield to him. I thought, what if I put myself in the story as the character of God and see what that is like. My feelings toward the story changed. I imagined standing at the foot of the mountain watching God decide how to best get across to Abraham this idea that, contrary to what everyone else was doing, and what was considered the respectable "norm," there should be no child sacrifices.

Perhaps Abraham couldn't have heard or understood this new concept at the bottom of the mountain, I reasoned. Perhaps it was too radical a shift and he would have swatted the voice of God away as a gnat buzzing in his ear. I began to see God as spiritual director, walking

alongside Abraham not wanting to deconstruct his whole religious system but help him shift one important element. I saw God's purpose wasn't to test Abraham's faith for God's own gratification but God's purpose was to set up the teachable moment to help Abraham "get it."

Like my food competition show, I thought this demonstrated creativity with the elements and a pleasant presentation.

And that's where I stood with this story, until I started preparing for this sermon. I liked the dish I cooked up out of the ingredients. I have prepared for you today a theology of human development and a God who is spiritual director rather than Trickster, one who is working to grow our souls rather than testing to see if we like Him best.

Reading the story again, I noticed that some things had changed for me—in me. It never before occurred to me to think of "test" as anything but the pass / fail kind, with its implications of judgment—an example of my story coloring the story. I assume that I was so afraid of failing, of being a disappointment, that that was the only meaning I could come up with at the time. This time it occurred to me to consider other uses of the word "test." For instance, we stick a toothpick into cake to see if it is done. We test for consensus to see if we are ready to vote or have more work to do. We run tests for diagnostic purposes to assess and determine the best way to proceed.

It struck me this time through the text that Abraham acts like someone taking a test who already knows the answers and the outcome. There's that funny little verse when he says we'll go worship and then come back. And the other one when he says, God will provide the lamb. I've always had a lot of angst with this journey up the mountain and assumed Abraham did too, but Abraham doesn't seem to exhibit much angst.

I also went back and read the entire story of Abraham. I had forgotten some things. Abraham argued with God a lot—particularly in pleading for God to spare the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Why plead for them and not for Isaac? And there were plenty of times Abraham acted out of fear, using deception to protect himself, making messes, not trusting God. This particular test with Isaac comes at the end of a lifetime of failure and discovery, walking with God, learning the nature of God.

Good Lord! Could it be this story really is about Abraham's faith?

I've gotten another chance to appear on the show Chopped. I open the basket this time, and I see the same ingredients only they look different to me. I see a readiness assessment instead of a test; a clued-in Abraham, ready to show that he understands; a Spiritual Director God; and what is missing from my basket is that big box labeled The Will of God. That's a whole other sermon.

What difference does all this make? If we are seeking a truer relationship with God, and a truer God with which to be in relationship, we will always be making adjustments, because we bring so much of our own story with all our foibles and fears to project onto the story. Until the crisis of faith I had in labor, I didn't know I had Trickster God living in me. It was not in my awareness. The funny thing about things we keep hidden in our subconscious is that they have tremendous power in our lives even if we don't acknowledge them. In every moment, whether aware or not, it matters if I stand in relationship with others with Trickster God in my bones or with the Abba of Jesus in my bones. It matters.

Who we are becoming is who we are in the world interacting with others, creating a particular kind of world, a particular reality. We often project our false gods into a story thinking it is the truth. Sometimes I wonder if God is asking, "Do you know me, do you see me, do you

know who I am—different from your fears and explanations, and justifications?” We are engaged in the same task as Abraham: discovering and leaving our false gods to follow the one true God.

I invite you to think about the elements of this story as your “basket” on the cooking show. What do you find when you open the basket? What ingredients do you have to work with? The idea is not to judge the contents of your basket; not to wish for something else or pretend it isn’t what it is, especially if you find it distasteful and difficult. And you don’t have to make something of it right off—you can go off and practice being a chef some more and then come back to it as you are ready.

God is in the elements, the ingredients of your life. God is in the container. And God is in you and in the movements in your life as you live, wrestle and grow. And remember, the toughest seeming test comes not at the beginning as proof of your faith, but later on after you already know what you need to know. It’s just the affirmation of what is already true.

Amen.