

7-2-17 Sermon – “Bodies on the Altar” – Genesis 22:1-14

“There’s a body on the altar, God. What are you going to do about it?”

I imagine that man of you have this morning’s Old Testament lesson before. It is a famous story common to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In Hebrew, this story is called the *Akedah*, literally “the binding”, for that is indeed what Abraham does to his beloved son – and very nearly slaughters him at God’s command.

This story is so familiar that it’s easy for us to become numb to how terrible it actually is. So just to be clear: this is a story about a boy who is about to be murdered. A story about a father who is willing to kill his own son. This is a story about a God who is willing to risk Isaac’s life to get a peek at Abraham’s faith.

Now, Abraham may be one of our founding patriarchs, a man repeatedly lifted up in both the Old and New Testaments as a model of faith. But I want to let you know that if Abraham were to walk through the doors of this church, he would *quickly* be barred from working with our children and youth. Believe me, “I took my son on a three-day journey to sacrifice him on Mount Moriah, but I stopped right before I killed him,” would *not* pass muster with any child protection policy.

And for that matter, if *God’s* character in this story were to walk in those doors, God would not pass that background check, either. What parent would leave their child with someone whose resume read, “Commanded Abraham to kill his son as a sacrifice to me – but don’t worry, I changed my mind at the last minute, once I saw that his faith was pure”? Small comfort, to say the least.

It’s a difficult story, a perplexing story, even a horrifying story. And friends, I’ve wrestled with this text all week, looking for a sign of light, a truth that needs to be heard.

Listening for the Holy Spirit to speak a Word from God. And what I've heard, and come to see, is that this is a story about bodies. Bodies at risk, bodies in action, even a body laid bare and in danger on the altar of sacrifice.

The entire story of Abraham and his family is a story about bodies, come to think of it. It's a story about Abraham's body, in which God locates the promise of a new people through whom the whole world will be blessed. About Sarah's body, which was unable to bear children and yet in her old age is awakened with the gift of new life. Of Hagar's body, used against her will by Abraham and Sarah to secure a son for Abraham. It's about Ishmael's body, cast out in the desert to die, and then saved by an angel who brings him the gift of water, that substance which all bodies need. It's a story about Isaac's body, filled with life and energy, the one through whose veins course the seed of God's promise to bless God's people.

In Abraham's story, bodies roar with laughter at the announcement of a child in Abraham and Sarah's old age, and bodies heave with sobs when Hagar and Ishmael are left to die in the desert. It's a story about sex, birth, and death. Even the covenant that God establishes with Abraham is a covenant about bodies, sealed in the sign of circumcision, a covenant made in flesh.

We who are the heirs of modernity and so-called "Western thought" tend to think of the world somewhat dualistically, with the body and the soul as separate entities. And the soul is always the more important of the two. But it wasn't so for the Hebrew people to whom this story belongs. No, the ancient Hebrews looked at the world *holistically*. Which means body and soul were intertwined, they could not be separated, and so flesh itself was something sacred and beautiful. For the ancient Hebrew people, *bodies* mattered.

Which is part of why this story was so shocking to its original audience. Because Isaac is the one flesh and blood descendant Abraham has left in his household. God has promised Abraham, and even made a covenant with him, that he will be the father of a great nation through which all people of the world will be blessed. And Isaac is the one body left in whom that promise can be fulfilled.

This is a story about bodies, but it's also a story about God.

The narrator begins by telling us that God is testing Abraham. And that is true: Abraham's faithfulness is put to the test, and he passes. But there is another being tested in this story, and that is God himself. After all, there are two sides to every covenant. This story asks the question "Will Abraham be faithful?" But at a deeper level, it also asks "Will God be faithful?" There is a body on the altar, God, a life on the line. What are you going to do?

In perhaps the most poignant moment in this text, Isaac himself looks up at his father Abraham and says, "I see we have the fire, and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" And Abraham answers, "God himself will provide the lamb, my son."

Is Abraham making up a story to calm his fearful son? Maybe. Or is he, perhaps, proclaiming that, despite all evidence to the contrary, God *will* be faithful to God's promise? Even *demanding* that God will be faithful – reminding God that there are two sides to this covenant. Reminding God that his son's own body – that God's own promise – is lying on the altar, vulnerable, and exposed, and moments away from death.

Because that's the thing about bodies; they are vulnerable. They get sick. They get injured. They break, and they are broken. They suffer, they hurt, they bleed, and they die. Bodies are so precious, flesh is so sacred, in spite of and perhaps even *because* of the fact that they can be

taken from us in an instant. Because bodies are vulnerable, and both in this story and in our world, some bodies are more vulnerable than others.

This week, as I studied this story of the *Akedah* – “the binding” – I came across a sermon offered by the Rabbi Tamara Cohen¹ two years ago during a celebration of Rosh Hashannah, the Jewish New Year. Rabbi Cohen spoke of how she was hearing the *Akedah* differently, more urgently, this year than she had in years past. She attributed this difference to a phone call she received from a friend who called her distraught over the news about Sandra Bland, a 28-year-old black woman who was pulled over for failing to signal before changing lanes, was inexplicably arrested, and three days later was found dead in prison.

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At first, Rabbi Cohen admitted, she was confused by her friend’s reaction to this story. Cohen was upset by the news, to be sure – even outraged – but she could not understand the urgency, the outright terror she heard in her friend’s voice.

“And then,” Cohen writes, “I saw it clearly. I saw her daughter, 17 years old, headed to Princeton after graduating as the only black Jewish girl from her yeshiva high school. I saw her suddenly, briefly, through her mother’s eyes. I saw the terror of having to release one’s child, one’s *black* child, to an unknown world, the terror of having to allow one’s baby to drive on a street through Princeton. Anywhere, really. And I felt shaken awake in a new way to the difference between my reality and the reality of my dear friend, both of us Jewish mothers who love our kids and would do anything to protect them. One of us white, and one of us black.”

Rabbi Cohen goes on, “This year for me, Abraham is a black father. And Isaac is his beloved son. And what happens in this story is that Abraham, through binding his son on the

altar, passes on to his son the terrifying truth that his body could be taken from him at any moment.”

“This year,” she says, “I am seeing Isaac – and asking you to see him – as an American boy with a black body. I am doing this because black bodies are the bodies in America today that hold the position of Isaac – the position of fear, of lack of freedom, of being struck, bound between the promise of a grand and fruitful future, and the very real possibility of immanent, unexplained, and incomprehensible death.

“But at the same time that I want us to hold the image of Isaac as a black child, I also want to hold him as every child. Because the binding of Isaac is a story that reveals that we *all* have bodies. And that, actually, every one of our bodies is vulnerable. Every one of our bodies would cry out, ‘I can’t breathe’ if it was put into a chokehold and we had asthma. Every one of our bodies would be destroyed if it was bound and driven around in the back of a police van.”

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Friends, we, like Isaac, are children of Abraham, children of God. And if there is one thing we share with every other child of God, it is this: we have vulnerable human bodies. If you cut us, we will bleed. If you tickle us, we will laugh. If you poison us, we will die. We are all fragile, vulnerable, human beings.²

If I understand the text, the truth at the center of this story – this *Akedah* – is that God chooses to fulfill God’s promises in bodies. God takes the risk of working out his faithfulness and his desires for all of Creation in the messy, dirty, *vulnerable* world of the flesh. God’s purposes are accomplished in *our* world. God’s promises are held in *our* bodies.

As Christians, this should perhaps come as no surprise to us. Because we who have come to know God in Jesus Christ know that the Word was made Flesh, that God comes to us with

skin on. If the incarnation of Jesus Christ teaches us anything, it teaches us this: that bodies matter to God. They matter so much, in fact, that God took on flesh, becoming just as human – just as vulnerable – as you and me. Just as vulnerable as Isaac, and Sandra Bland, and Eric Garner, and Freddy Gray. Just as vulnerable as the war-weary refugees we see on the news. Just as vulnerable as the 22 million people in our own country whose access to healthcare hangs precariously in the balance of a Senate vote.

In Jesus Christ, God said “My story is a story about bodies. *Your* story is a story about bodies. Your faithfulness, your discipleship, will be worked out and made known in bodies. You will meet bodies who are hungry: give them food. Bodies who are thirsty: give them something to drink. When you see bodies who are strangers: welcome them; and bodies who are naked: clothe them. In this world there will be bodies who are sick: take care of them. And bodies who are in prison: visit them. Do this because you have a body, and they have a body, and I myself, your Lord Jesus Christ, have a body. Truly I tell you, what you do to these bodies, you also do to me.

There are bodies on the altar. Friends, what are *we* going to do about it?

¹ <https://theshalomcenter.org/binding-isaac-black-lives-matter-bodies-fear>.

² Shakespeare, William. *The Merchant of Venice*. Act III, Scene 1.