Jim's Sermon – July 2, 2023

The Binding of Isaac

Today's reading from Genesis is another challenging scripture, the story of how Abraham was asked to sacrifice his son, Isaac. In Hebrew the story is called the *Akedah*. This story is also in the Quran, but there Ishmael is the one who is to be sacrificed by his father Abraham.

In the Christian tradition this story is referred to as the Binding of Isaac, and it has given rise to many interpretations. It is said to foreshadow the central story of the New Testament, the sacrifice of Jesus at the crucifixion. The traditional approach to this reading would be to talk about radical obedience to God.
But if you are like me, this story inspires horror at the thought that God could ask such a thing of Abraham, to kill the son that he waited for until his 100th year; and horror that Abraham could even contemplate killing his own son.
We might be able to imagine being asked to sacrifice ourselves for our children. To be asked to murder one's own child, however, that is hard for most of us to get our heads around.

I had always pictured Isaac in this story as a little boy, but a little research revealed that the traditional view has Isaac as a strong young man, as in the famous painting by Caravaggio. We see in this painting the moment when the angel of God appears to stop Abraham from slaying Isaac. We see the horror on Isaac's face, who by

now has realized what is really going on, and has to be held down by his father, who struggles to do so. The angel has a grip on Abraham's hand and Abraham is wearing an expression of determination, as if once he decided to go through with the sacrifice, he had hard time shifting gears. In the painting, as in the

story, he appears fully prepared to kill his only son. How can this be? It is inconceivable to us.
And yet, if we stop and think clearly and realistically about the way we, as a society, have treated the young adults among us, then perhaps this story is not so shocking as it might first appear.

Just a week or so ago we had a young man give a concert in this church. Sasha, who is a very promising pianist, was brought from Ukraine to Shawnigan Lake School because if he had stayed in his country he would have been drafted into the military and perhaps killed on the field of battle, where already over 10,000 young soldiers have lost their lives since the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian army.
Wilfrid Owen was a soldier poet of WWI. He wrote this poem about the binding of Isaac, entitled the **Old Man and the Young**:

So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,
And took the fire with him, and a knife.
And as they sojourned both of them together,
Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,
Behold the preparations, fire and iron,
But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?
Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
and builded parapets and trenches there,
And stretchèd forth the knife to slay his son.
When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
Neither do anything to him. Behold,
A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.
But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

Between 1900 and 1990, 43 million soldiers died in war; young men and women, strong and healthy and with promising futures. Many of those died defending freedom and civilian populations and many died as fodder for tyrants. But in every case, it could be said that they were sacrificed by those in power who were fully prepared to sacrifice the lives of young soldiers.

Last year 2000 young people died in British Columbia as a result of overdoses of opioids or poisoned drugs. Suicide is the second largest cause of death among teenagers in Canada.

If we react with horror to the story of the binding of Isaac, we only need to look around to see thousands of young people who have been (and are being sacrificed often as a result of neglect and disinterest by society; senselessly and needlessly.

Obviously, these issues, (war, the opioid crisis, despair among young people); these are complicated issues. But as biblical people, people who are led by the words of scripture, how are we to respond, and what does the story of the Binding of Isaac offer as guidance.

During the time of Abraham there was a god worshipped by Abraham's neighbours named Moloch, and it was the practice of the Canaanites to sacrifice children to Moloch as a way of avoiding his wrath. I believe it is possible that the story of the Binding of Isaac is a story that shows how the God of Abraham was different than the god, Moloch, and other gods who demanded human sacrifice; that the lesson in the story is just the opposite of what it first appears to be, that the God of the Hebrews will not be a God who demands, or approves of human sacrifice in any form.

And while it might seem natural for us to identify with Abraham (and as I have said, it is perfectly legitimate to see this story as being about obedience to God), there is another choice here. What if we see this story not from the perspective of Abraham, but from the perspective of the angel of the Lord? The one who calls out to Abraham not to harm the boy. What if we take the role of the one who saves Isaac? And what if we extend this role to be one who calls for an end to violence and neglect of all young people.

- We can all be advocates for young people, whatever our age.
- We can stand beside them and encourage them as they speak up for what they believe to be true and good.
- We can support them, by listening respectfully and carefully.
- We can encourage them to think critically and clearly and to decide for themselves what is important.
- We can get out of their way when they decide on a course of action. And when they show a readiness to assume leadership roles themselves.
- We can offer guidance and, in some cases, more concrete help.
- And we can share ourselves with them, expressing to them who we are and welcoming them to share their lives with us.

One of the things I have learned from living and working with teenagers for the past decade and a half is that the thing they yearn for from adults more than anything else, is authenticity. It doesn't matter who you are, as long as you are yourself. What I have learned from my students is that they really despise hypocrisy, and they see it everywhere. As a religious person this is particularly challenging. Even though they don't know much about religion, most of them have a vague sense that religious people are phonies. At Shawnigan I am challenged every day to be honestly who I am.

Listening, supporting and communicating honestly and authentically; these are all things that constitute what it means to be an elder, to be the angel who calls for an end to violence and neglect and indifference toward and against our youth. It is not only an important role, it is potentially the most important role we can play in life. And if there are not many young people in our lives, we always have the capacity to pray, to pray for their protection, their peace, their safety and that they might flourish, even in a world as fraught with difficulties and challenges as the one they are facing.

And we can pray that our hearts would be opened and welcoming in all the little encounters that we have throughout the week with young people, as we shop or get gas or go about our day-to-day business, encounters that may seem small and insignificant, but have the potential to be great.