

Rev. Kate LeFranc

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Genesis 22:1-14

Matthew 10:40-42

A few months ago, I was in New York for a whirlwind trip over my birthday. I sent out invitations to join me for a birthday dinner on the Sunday night that was actually my birthday – but of course since all of my New York friends are all either pastors or grad students and/or have brand new babies, getting all of us together at once was basically impossible! So instead, David and I wandered around the city the following day, meeting up with friends for coffee in one place and lunch in another and cupcakes in a third. It was like a race for all the catching up we could do in the middle of 5 different crazy schedules!

At one point we met up with my friend Jesse in the west village for falafel, and then all walked together across town to a fabulous little bakery on the way to his next appointment. Jesse and I are such kindred spirits in terms of being curious about everything, especially classical and biblical literature, so instead of updates on babies and family and that sort of thing, we managed to immediately get ourselves deep into conversation about Jewish theology, while running across town to get the best cupcakes in the city. He was really excited to tell me about a book he'd been reading by Douglas Rushkoff which had made such a difference for him in thinking about his own Jewishness and about particular formative texts. I was excited to hear it, of course, because there's nothing I like more than a good theological conversation!

And so I found myself speed-walking down West 11th street in New York City, trying not to get red velvet cupcake all over myself, while having an intense discussion about the meaning of the story of the binding of Isaac, and what on earth that means about God, in both the Jewish tradition and the Christian tradition. It seems fitting, somehow, although that probably says more about me than anything else.

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At first glance, our two texts today couldn't be more different. We've gotten used to the repetition of Jesus' words in Matthew, his instructions to the disciples as he sends them out into the world, and it seems logical: welcome one another; nothing too challenging.

And on the other hand we've got one of the most difficult and counter-intuitive texts in all of scripture: the story of Abraham and his son Isaac, and what comes very close to human sacrifice. Isaac is bound and laying on the wood on the altar, wordless except for his first innocent question – "Father, where is the lamb for the sacrifice?" – and Abraham has his knife ready, poised to kill his beloved son because that's what he thinks God wants.

What do we do with *that* one?? Is this even the same God we're talking about here? How could we possibly worship a God who would ask such a thing? And moreover, why on earth would God ask that in the first place? Isaac was just born in the previous chapter of Genesis, a miraculous birth for Abraham and Sarah in their old age, the beginnings of God's covenant with Abraham and the Israelites, a fulfillment of God's promise.

For that matter, what kind of God would put Isaac through that kind of trauma? I can only imagine what that must have been like for him, to go off onto the mountain with a dear father he trusted, prepared to worship God together in this familiar place; and the dawning, sickening realization that *he* is the sacrifice. Ultimately he finds himself bound on the altar, feeling utterly betrayed and terrified for what is to come, probably running away in his mind, watching as if from a distance because otherwise he would crumble in hopeless fear.

How can we worship a God who would do that? Who would *desire* that, as the narrator seems to tell it? Interpreters have been wrestling with this text for centuries, and they've come up with some interesting ideas but no really satisfying answers. Perhaps, as the narrator tells it, God is testing the depths of Abraham's commitment. Still, it seems unspeakably cruel to use Isaac as a pawn in a test like that.

Or perhaps, as some Jewish interpreters have suggested (as I learned from my friend on the streets of New York), God is really testing if Abraham has been listening to God's repeated instructions not to be like the people around them, not to worship those other gods, not to sacrifice children like *they* do. And in that reading I can imagine God burying face in hands in disappointment – "*Really, Abraham?? Did you really think I would ask you to kill a child?*" – reaching in to stop Abraham's hand before any more damage can be done.

And of course we can't really know what God's motivations were here, assuming it was God's voice Abraham was hearing in the first place. But, for whatever reason, Abraham find himself in a place we know all too well: what he believes God is asking him to do pits him squarely against what is right for his relationships, even directly against the life of a person he loves. It's a terrible place to be, but as people of faith, we find ourselves in a similar bind all too frequently. There is no easy answer, because either we're betraying our beliefs, or we're betraying our loved ones, and that's no kind of choice to make.

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Our denomination finds itself in such a situation now. No doubt many of you have heard by now about several controversial decisions that have come out of our General Assembly in recent weeks – decisions made with the utmost care and prayerful reflection – but in no way easy decisions. Equally faithful people are coming down divided on issues which seem to put us in a conflict like Abraham's: it's come down to our relationships versus our convictions, and there is no halfway.

Two actions were taken related to same-sex marriage: one proposal to amend the definition of marriage in our Directory for Worship to read "two people," instead of "one man and one woman," which will be voted on in the presbyteries; and an Authoritative Interpretation allowing pastors to perform any legal marriage according to their conscience. This conversation about sexuality issues has so dominated our life as a denomination, as it has in so many others recently.

And yet the more controversial decision to come out of GA this year was a resolution to divest our money from three companies profiting from Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories. This too has been debated around in circles for years, as we have studied the situation and the actions of these companies and tried fruitlessly to convince them of more peaceful ways. And as we talk with friends and colleagues in Israeli and Palestinian and US Jewish leadership, we get mired deeper and deeper into the history of conflict and genocide and the longing for a homeland; made all the more passionate because of the deep faith convictions of so many people on all sides.

And what it seems so many of these conversations boil down to is this foundational story: one person tied up on the altar, their life in the hands of a person who holds a knife to their throat because they believe it's God's will.

We have already sacrificed so many of our lesbian and gay children, our transgender friends and neighbors, our bisexual and queer colleagues, pastors, cousins... on that altar we think God wanted us to build. And perhaps we heard God stopping our hands at the last second, saw the angel swooping in, but by that point the damage had been done. The trust was gone, and rightly so.

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And yet sometimes it's not even *that* clear. Sometimes our convictions lead us into murky waters, and even the mention of the word "Israel" is enough to make normally-opinionated people suddenly the models of tact, because the risk of offending someone is too high. Sometimes our fears are too great, where something that might be heard as a critique of Israel, or of the US for that matter, would mark us as a terrorist or an anti-Semite, or simply an awful person. And so we turn a blind eye; don't listen to our convictions because to point out the violence and injustice committed by a friend is too big a risk.

And so it is easier sometimes just to let things be. Perhaps if we pretend not to see the Palestinian children bound up on our altars, or the LGBT children with our knives at their throats, perhaps we can continue to pretend that this is just between us and God. That God is just testing us to see how faithful we are, never mind anyone who might be sacrificed in the process.

The truth is that our theology matters, our convictions matter, and what we hear God saying *matters* – not because it is more important than the lives of our loved ones, but because over and over again God says to us, *love one another as I have loved you*. Over and over God says, I do not want your sacrifices, I want your justice. Over and over Jesus repeats, whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and welcomes the God who sent me. Whoever offers a cup of water to a stranger in my name is beloved of God.

Over and over God says, I am a god of justice, a god of welcome, a god who has made a covenant with you, my beloved people. *This* is the God we have come to know. This is the God whose guidance we seek, whose voice we trust, whose presence we long for.

I don't know what to do with the story Abraham tells of a time when God asked him to kill his son; but I do know that feeling of being caught between what I think God is saying and the person I'm about to hurt. It's an impossible place to be.

Sometimes we misunderstand God. Sometimes we can only see a tiny part of God's bigger picture, and we think we're chiseling away at a stone when we're really stabbing at an elephant. Sometimes we hear God all too well, and we decide to do our own thing because the truth is too complicated.

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It's hard to know, sometimes, whose voice it is we are following. And so we turn back, in times like this, to the fundamentals of who God is and who Jesus is, the foundations on which all our faith is built. Back to the very beginning: Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, and you shall love the Lord with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. And Jesus' second commandment: Love your neighbor as yourself.

And we can turn to newer words like those of the Belhar Confession, written in South Africa during Apartheid: “We believe that Christ's work of reconciliation is made manifest in the church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another;

- that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God's Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain;
- that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted.

It is a strange world we live in sometimes. We rush around like never before, hearing conflicting voices and opinions and stories from every corner of the world, so that it is hard to know what's true and what's false and what's almost-true-but-not-quite.

But our God has not changed, and the words of Jesus have not changed, and they are the criteria by which we judge all else: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength; love your neighbor as yourself. Period.