

**TROUBLING GOD**  
Randall Tremba  
June 29, 2014  
13th Sunday of Ordinary Time  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

\* \* \*

Before us this morning is one of the most terrifying and troubling biblical stories. It's from the Abraham saga. But before we get to that let's take a quick review of how that saga began.

Once upon a time, about 4000 years ago, the Lord did trouble Abraham and Sarah. The Lord said, *leave your comfortable tribal lives—all that defines and confines you—and go to a new place.* At that time they lived in Mesopotamia, between the Tigris and Euphrates, today known as Iraq.

*Leave your homeland, your family and kindred behind,* said the Lord.

Now it might have been a voice from the outside but more likely it was a hunch, an intuition or nudging from within. Most of these Old Testament stories are like that. "God" can be a stand in or projection for a side of humanity yet to be fully revealed or understood.

For example, later in this saga Abraham learned that God was going to destroy the entire population of Sodom and Gomorrah due to their wickedness, the way a modern nation might decide to destroy an entire city or two. But Abraham was troubled by that and began troubling God with a question. What if there are 50 innocent people in those cities? *For 50, I will not destroy it,* said God. What about 45? *For 45 I won't either.* What about 30? What about 10—for heaven's sake?

Abraham was troubling God to see if God could be merciful instead of vengeful. And that, as it turns out, is a human question as well. It's a question in the fever of war—or a personal vendetta—we don't often ask.

*Is there a way to be merciful in this situation?*

But long before that quarrel, God said to Sarah and Abraham: *Leave the security of your people and journey to a land I will show you.* If we pay attention, we too might be invited or nudged into a journey from one place to another, from what we are to what we can become.

*In that new land you will thrive,* said God. *You will have children as numerous as the stars in the heavens and you will find a way to bless all families, tribes and nations, not just yours.* You will learn to look beyond your own self-interest. Imagine that!

I believe that particular story (Genesis 12:1-3) reflects a quantum leap in human brain development and was reflected in other cultures around the globe at that time. That era is sometimes called the Axial Age—an awakening to higher ethical standards. The Golden Rule was taking shape.

Something was occurring in the evolution of humankind—a radical vision of peace and inclusivity, a "Great Perhaps" was arising and would later fully manifest itself in a distant son of Abraham and Sarah named Jesus. But the pursuit of that promise would be fraught with great difficulty for at that time

humans were tribal and clannish, fearful of others, hostile and belligerent. And, I guess we should say: things are only slightly less so today. So those who long and work for such a new world will be tested as Abraham and Sarah were tested, as metal is tested.

*You will flourish*, said the Lord.

But years went by. And still Abraham at age 100 and Sarah at age 90 had no children. So Abraham troubled God for a sign and, according to that epic story, Sarah became pregnant and gave birth to Isaac, the “son of laughter” for Sarah had laughed at the prospects of childbirth at her advanced age. There he was, at last—the child of the promise, their only child whom Abraham would contemplate killing as a sacrifice to his God.

And now for one of the most terrifying and troubling stories from our Scriptures (Genesis 22:1-14). It is also one of the lenses through which the crucifixion of Jesus has been interpreted. WARNING: you may want to cover the ears of any children sitting near you.

After these things God tested Abraham. God said, "Abraham!" And Abraham said, "Here I am. What do you want?"

"Take your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering." Which is to say, kill him with a knife and burn his body as a sacrifice to me.

Now that's a *troubling* God. Any of us would have retorted: *are you out of your mind?*

Now, I am pretty sure that God did not order such a thing. I do, however, believe Abraham imagined God had said such a thing, not unlike the way we imagine God saying things from the Bible or otherwise.

You may recall that former President Bush was asked in 2003 if he had consulted with his father—that would be the older, former President Bush. The son was asked if he had conferred with his father on the wisdom of invading Iraq since his father had considered and rejected an attack on Baghdad after the quick success of the Persian Gulf War in 1992.

No, I didn't, replied the younger President Bush. I have a “higher father” with whom I consult. By which he meant God.

And God said to Abraham: “Take your only son, whom you love, and offer him as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.”

So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place. He took the wood and laid it on his son's back.

The two of them walked on together. When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham bound his son, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.

But the angel of the LORD called from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."

Now what? One voice had said, *kill*. Now another says, *don't*. One says, *yes*. Another, *no*. And that is the moment to decide. That was a human moment to decide: who or what will I honor and obey?

[One variation on this story says it wasn't an angel but rather Sarah, Isaac's mother, who screamed out: STOP! And why not Sarah? Mothers often understand what men fail to see.]

Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.

To which we might add: *Whew! Thank God.*

So here's one take way: *even when you think you're absolutely right, it pays to keep your ears and heart open because you just might have been wrong all along.* To Abraham's credit he was still listening.

Before we dismiss this troubling story outright, let's try to understand the historic and cultural context out of which it arose and then see what if any use it has for us as a metaphor for our lives.

As hard as it is to ponder, child sacrifice was not uncommon in the ancient world. Less than 2000 years ago in this hemisphere the Maya and Incas practiced child sacrifice and other cultures older yet, including the Hebrew or pre-Jewish culture, and many surrounding Middle Eastern societies did as well. It was part of the Old Testament cultural milieu.

As humans evolved out of the animal world, they began to ask questions their animal forebears could not imagine or articulate. *What must we do to survive and thrive in this mysterious world where the sun appears and then disappears, where the earth quakes, storms howl and lightning sets forests ablaze? Who or what is out there? Who made this world? And how can we get on its good side?*

Long before there were organized religions, humans were haunted by the mysterious and unpredictable powers in and above the earth. *What do they want from us? What will please and appease them? If we appease tribal warlords with gifts, what might those invisible lords want from us? No doubt, something precious?*

And so by trial and error, many pre-historic tribes concluded that child sacrifice seemed to appease the gods. It was an early form of scientific thinking. Trial and error. What works? And *that* seemed to work.

Yes, it's appalling. But before we get overly judgmental and self-righteous, consider how even now societies make decisions that sacrifice the future of children and allow many to die—such as war, global warming, soaring national debt and world wide economic disparity.

Abraham was a child of his times and thought this way was the right way. But the Lord did trouble him to see another way, a way he hadn't seen before. And I'm pretty sure the Lord will trouble us too if we close our eyes or hearts to injustice.

One way to see this story is as countercultural resistance to a common, nearly universal cultural practice. It declares: *no more; never again. That is no way to treat*

*children or anyone for that matter. And so we ask ourselves: who today will be troubled enough to stand up for others, for the innocent and vulnerable?*

It's true, in the name of religion many people have been driven to kill or oppress others. In the name of one particular religion, Jews, Native Americans, African Americans, women, and LGBT persons have been persecuted and killed. Like Abraham, people get religion and other things wrong all the time. But guess what? We can change. And we do. We learn to see things differently, more humanely.

And so it was that Abraham's descendents would sacrifice animals instead of humans. But even that practice would eventually be left behind for another way.

What does the Lord require, asked the 6th century BCE Hebrew prophet Micah? No, not animal sacrifices. Not that at all. What does the Lord require but to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly. Compassion, justice and humility. That's it! (Micah 6:8)

And that brings us to this story as metaphor. Sometimes we have to resist the voices and assumptions in our heads—voices from our family, church or society that are trying to kill off our potential, our nation's or the world's potential, trying to sacrifice what we are most completely meant to be.

And so we pray, even as we sing: *open my eyes that I may see. Open my heart that I may believe. Trouble me, Lord, to do what is right and to be who I really am.*

\* \* \*

HYMN "Open My Eyes That I May See