

“The Binding of Abraham”
19 September 2004
Unity Church–Unitarian

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READING: Contraband – Denise Levertov

The tree of knowledge was the tree of reason.
That’s why the taste of it
drove us from Eden. That fruit
was meant to be dried and milled to a fine powder
for use a pinch at a time, a condiment.
God had probably planned to tell us later
about this new pleasure.
We stuffed our mouths full of it,
gorged on but and if and how and again
but, knowing no better.
It’s toxic in large quantities; fumes
swirled in our heads and around us
to form a dense cloud that hardened to steel,
a wall between us and God, Who was Paradise.
Not that God is unreasonable – but reason
in such excess was tyranny
and locked us into its own limits, a polished cell
reflecting our own faces. God lives
on the other side of that mirror,
but through the slit where the barrier doesn’t
quite touch ground, manages still
to squeeze in – as filtered light,
splinters of fire, a strain of music heard
then lost, then heard again.

READING: excerpt from Sarah’s Choice – Eleanor Wilner

A little late rain
the desert in the beauty of its winter
bloom, the cactus ablaze
with yellow flowers that glow
even at night in the reflected light
of moon and the scattered crystal of sand
when time was so new
that God still walked
among the tents, leaving no prints
in the sand, but a brand burned into
the heart – on such a night
it must have been, although

it is not written in the Book
how God spoke to Sarah
what he demanded of her
how many questions came of it
how a certain faith was
fractured, as a stone is split
by its own fault, a climate of extremes
and one last drastic change
in the temperature.

“Go!” said the voice. “Take your son,
your only son, whom you love,
take him to the mountain, bind him
and make of him a burnt offering.”
Now Isaac was the son of Sarah’s age,
a gift, so she thought, from God. And how
could he ask her even to imagine such a thing —
to take the knife
of the butcher and thrust it
into such a trusting heart, the
light the pyre on which tomorrow burns.
What fear could be more holy
than the fear of that?

“Go!” said the Voice, Authority’s own.
And Sarah rose to her feet, stepped out
of the tent of Abraham to stand between
the desert and the distant sky, holding its stars
like tears it was too cold to shed.
Perhaps she was afraid the firmament
would shudder and give way, crushing her
like a line of ants who, watching
the ants ahead marching safe under the arch,
are suddenly smashed by the heel
they never suspected. For Sarah,
with her desert-dwelling mind, could
see the grander scale in which the heel
might simply be the underside of some Divine
intention. On such a scale, what is
a human son? So there she stood, absurd
in the cosmic scene, an old woman bent
as a question mark, a mote in the eye
of God. And then it was that Sarah spoke
in a soft voice, a speech
the canon does not record.

READING: When I Have Learned – C. S. Lewis

When I have learned to love God better than my earthly dearest, I shall love my earthly dearest better than I do now. In so far as I learn to love my earthly dearest at the expense of God and instead of God, I shall be moving toward that state in which I shall not love my earthly dearest at all. When first things are put first, second things are not suppressed but increased.

SERMON: The Binding of Abraham – Rob Eller-Isaacs

There are some stories that are just as strong as songs. A strong story has a melody, which insinuates itself inside us. Once nestled in the melody refuses to be wrested out. There are songs, which hard as we try we just can't get out of our minds. *"Raindrops are fallin' on my head...I love you, you love me, we're a happy family...Amazing grace how sweet the sound."* Only the masters of Tin Pan Alley and the ones through whom the stories turn to scripture know the formula. The great poet Robert Creeley once observed that in a poem, "I tend to hear whatever can be called its melody long before I've reached an understanding of what it all might mean."

Early in my ministry I did my very best to shake the old stories right out of my head. I condemned the testaments, both old and new, as nothing more than weapons hanging from the belt of patriarchal power. And in those days no story made me quite as furious as the story we consider once again today. The story of Abraham and Isaac, called in Hebrew, the Akedda, is one of the most troubling stories in the Hebrew Scriptures. Religious liberals tend to use it as a prime example of why we reject that old desert God. What kind of a God would demand such a thing? Why would any sane man listen to a Voice which told him he should sacrifice his son?

On the face of it the story seems to give carte blanche to those who seek to sacrifice their sons and daughters for imperial gain. The English poet Wilfred Owen wrote:

So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went
And took the fire with him, and a knife...
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.

Owen, understandably, twists the story to reflect his own experience in the horror of the trenches. The scripture tells us otherwise. The way the story goes in Genesis the old man did as the angel bid him do. He put down his knife, gave Isaac back his life and sacrificed the Ram of Pride instead.

What troubles us most about the story is the fact that Abraham was willing "to take the knife of the butcher and thrust it into such a trusting heart." We cannot or will not imagine ourselves capable of such a violation of all that we consider holy. And yet the story will not let us go. The melody still lingers. The song still comes to mind each time we fail to live up to our own aspirations. I confess that I have rarely been the father I have longed to be. And I'm sure I'm not alone in grieving all the many times I've sacrificed my children in the interest of some cause far less important than their lives.

The song still comes to mind especially at this time of year when we join the Jewish community in acknowledging "the Days of Awe," the ten days from Rosh Hashanah through to Yom Kippur. In these days we are asked to consider our lives in light of our most holy aspirations, to confess our sins, to acknowledge our

shortcomings, to make amends and to begin again in love. The traditional text for Rosh Hashanah, which is the New Year celebration for the Jews, is the Akedda, the Binding of Isaac. Jews are also asked to spend time on each of the Days of Awe in contemplation of the 22nd Psalm. Both texts point powerfully to a kind of abject faith, a complete submission to God's will and way with which religious liberals are justifiably and desperately uncomfortable.

The 22nd Psalm begins "My God, My God why hast thou forsaken me." These are the final words that Jesus uttered on the cross before he died. The Psalm goes on to list the devastations, which have been heaped upon the one who cries out from the pit of his despair. But then the great Psalm ends with a verse which begins "Let all the ends of the earth remember and turn again to the Lord." What begins in desperation becomes in its conclusion an astounding affirmation of the Psalmist's faith in God. I had always assumed that Jesus made his plea because he felt abandoned by the one that he called, "Abba, Father." But it seems he only lacked the breath in his last moments to complete the Psalm so as to reaffirm his faith even in the face of agony.

Though Abraham is silent in response to God's command, the story of the sacrifice of Isaac, or at least what we imagine Abraham must surely have experienced, parallels the 22nd Psalm. There is a torturous wisdom in the insistence of tradition that we begin each New Year wrestling with these images of abject faith. Though usually framed primarily as a story about faith, the Akedda can also be understood as being about the beginning of wisdom. It's said "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." The word translated as "fear" can also be rendered as "reverence." The verb "to revere" has almost disappeared from modern American English but we have good reason to reinstitute its use. Reverence is the virtue that keeps people from trying to act like God. When we revere the power infinitely greater than ourselves, the transcendent mystery some of us call God, we find ourselves far more capable of living in loving and positive ways. "When I have learned to love God better than my earthly dearest, I shall love my earthly dearest better than I do now."

In preparing for this sermon I came across an interpretation of the story I'd never seen before. Leon Kass, the Harding Professor in the Committee on Social Thought and the College at the University of Chicago and the Chairman of the President's Council on Bioethics, in The Beginning of Wisdom, his magnificent treatise on Genesis, sheds new light on the old strong story. He writes:

Father Abraham, I submit, is the model father, both of his family and of his people - yes, even in his willingness to sacrifice his son - because he reveres God, the source of life and blessing and the teacher of righteousness, more than he loves his own. He is a model not because all fathers should literally seek to imitate him; almost none of us could, and fortunately none of us has to. He is a model, rather, because he sets an admirable example for proper paternal rule, in which the love of one's own children is put in the service of the right the good and the holy.

This sermon is entitled "The Binding of Abraham." Though Isaac is the child bound and laid upon the altar, Abraham himself is in a bind. It's a bind that every father knows. We parents are our children's little gods. We are the focus of their adoration and their fear. And in our tendency to cleave to what Janne calls "the illusion of fusion," we inadvertently require their obeisance. We long for our children to love us, to forgive us for bringing them into a world in which they must inevitably struggle, to turn to us for sage advice in times of crisis and return to us when home is where they have to be. The bind, which every parent knows, is that our job is ultimately to let them go.

When I began to consider this sermon I thought I would augment the text by making up a story. I thought it would be sweet to tell you how Abraham and Isaac reconciled. I imagined how Sarah forgave the old man, how they kissed and made up. But the text is too strong to betray it with sweetness. There is no indication in the text that Abraham and Isaac ever spoke to each other again. Their relationship could not be mended. But Isaac turned toward the right and the good and the holy. He loved Rachel. He loved their children. He

fulfilled the destiny God had in mind for him. He turned away from Abraham whose fierce faith he could not forgive nor even comprehend. But in turning away from his father he turned toward all that's holy, a fact that should have been his father's greatest joy. And who can know what Sarah thought and felt about the man she'd been with for so very long. The text mentions Sarah only once more:

Sarah lived for a hundred and twenty seven years and died in Kiriatharba, which is Hebron, in Canaan. Abraham went in to mourn over Sarah and to weep for her.

And we are left with no answers, only the wind on the mountaintop, only the haunting melody that will not let us go. There is no story of forgiveness here, no reconciliation, no atonement. For that is work that you and I have yet to do. And so we turn to one another in full knowledge that when we do we see the face of God reflected in our neighbor's eyes. As we embrace these Days of Awe, as we enter with hearts overflowing into this New Year, may each and all of us be new-forgiven and begin again in love.

Shalom, amen and blessed be.