

Stories of the Hebrew Bible

Lesson 4: Abraham and Isaac

2.26.2017

Objectives: Debate the story of Abraham and Isaac as a story of tested faith.

Materials: flipchart, lesson attachments.

Time allotments suggested and meant to be adapted for **75 minute class**.

1. Nametags and Graffiti Wall (5 minutes before class begins)

- Make nametags using blank paper, markers, and holders. Youth can create their own unique but LEGIBLE nametag. Make it a regular practice to wear nametags.
- “Graffiti Wall” questions: Write the following on whiteboard. Invite youth as they arrive to grab a marker and weigh in with their responses:
 - ▶ What is one quality you look for in someone that says they’re trustworthy?
 - ▶ From your most recent worship (likely Story Sunday, Feb. 12), what’s one thing that you remember as interesting or meaningful?
- Teachers complete attendance sheets.
- **Please take a few minutes to invite reflections from youth about their recent worship experience. Use copies of worship programs as helpful reminder.**

2. Silly Fun: Tree Pose (5 minutes max)

We say that Unity is a place where people lead lives of integrity, service, and joy. We say that at church we find and keep our balance. So in the spirit of yoga.... who can stand on one leg the longest, in a tree pose, *with their eyes closed?!?!*



3. Chalice Lighting: Light the chalice, saying these words together: “We light this chalice as a symbol of our faith; the light of truth and the warmth of love.”

Teacher reads: (from Mohandas Gandhi, teacher of nonviolence and leader of the Indian independence movement in British-ruled India)

“Faith must be enforced by reason... when faith becomes blind it dies.”

(from Carol Gilligan, feminist ethicist)

“The blind willingness to sacrifice people to truth has always been the danger of an ethics abstracted from life.”

4. **Joys and Sorrows** (10 minutes): Listening is a precious gift that we offer one another at church. Using the balance scale and the blue (sorrows) and yellow (joys) stones, invite youth to share a joy and/or a sorrow from the past week, as a way of *meeting* one another with our lives and *sharing* in community. You will want to set limits (e.g. two stones max per person) so that no one monopolizes sharing time.

Each Sunday, a copy of the congregation's Embracing Meditation will be made available to your class, so that stones can be put in for those whose names are being spoken in the Sanctuary.

5. **Story: Abraham and Isaac** (15 minutes)

Teacher introduces story: The covenant made with God will be a recurring theme in the stories of the Hebrew Bible. It is this covenant – this special promise of love and trust – that will define Abraham and his descendants as God's people. And how well they stay true to the covenant will determine whether they will be blessed as a people.

Reading: Hand out copies of the story "The Hardest Test of All" (attachment) and invite volunteers to read portions aloud. Before reading the story, prompt youth to consider a longstanding question from the rabbis and Jewish teachers: *Is God testing Abraham, or is Abraham testing God... or are they testing each other?*

Questions for Discussion:

- So the big question: How many youth think that Abraham was actually going to sacrifice his son Isaac? How many think he would not have? Why or why not?
- Is this a story that celebrates unwavering faith? Or warns about the dangers of blind faith?
- What are we to learn from this story about being faithful? Is it blind faith? Or is having faith/trust in someone something to be questioned, doubted, reconsidered again and again?
- We may frown on ancient practices of human and child sacrifice, but might we modern people also sacrifice our children and young, out of blind faith to "patriotism" or "success" or other causes/ideologies?

6. **Midrash on the Story** (25 minutes)

Teacher Summarizes: In the rabbinic tradition, one of the longstanding questions about this story has been "Who is testing whom?" *Midrash* is the Hebrew term for rabbinic literature that contains interpretations and commentaries on scripture. The purpose of *midrash* was to debate and resolve problems posed by difficult passages of the Hebrew Bible. So let's have a debate!

Midrash Debate: Draw a thick line down the center of the flipchart, dividing into two sides with two headings: “*God is testing Abraham*” and “*Abraham is testing God.*”

- Divide youth into 2 debate teams, to find textual evidence and arguments to support their side.
- Give each team a debate form (attachment) to complete and 10 minutes to prepare their *midrash*: Teams should have someone ready to present using their debate form. (*Formal debate language, or courtroom flair is encouraged!*)
- Teacher moderates debate, giving each side their turn to present, and keeping time. On the flipchart, list the evidence under each heading. For example:

God is testing Abraham

- a) Opening sentence says God is testing Abraham.
- b) As for Abraham, he is described **not** as testing God but determined to obey God’s command, “no matter what it cost.”
- c) Abraham doesn’t challenge God. He actually binds Isaac, draws the knife and holds it up above his head, ready to strike.
- d) God literally says God was testing Abraham!

Abraham is testing God

- a) Abraham tells servants that “**We** will make our sacrifice and come back to you.”
- b) Abraham tells Isaac that GOD will provide the lamb.
- c) Yes, Abraham binds Isaac, draws the knife and holds it above his head. But why hold the knife above his head instead of just killing him immediately? Doesn’t it seem like Abraham is waiting and trusting that God will intervene?!
- d) At the end, Abraham says to Isaac that God, indeed, provided the lamb (just as he predicted)!

- Beyond who won and lost the debate, what can we learn from this debate? **Namely, who is testing whom?**

(Hint: Many rabbinic interpretations argue that they were testing each other, pushing each other to see the very limits of their trust and fidelity to the covenant made.)

7. **Teacher summarizes** (5 minutes) the following critical background information to provide further perspective on this disturbing and difficult story:

- As modern people, we have difficulty comprehending that human sacrifice was a fact of life in the ancient Near East. Israel’s rejection of this practice took place over a long period of time, *but no biblical story better depicts this transformation in the religion of the early Hebrews than the story of Abraham’s non-sacrifice of Isaac.*

- The story contains the **ambiguity** of all historical moments when transformation is occurring, shifting from one worldview to another worldview not yet entirely clear. So the story (1) seems like any other story of human sacrifice of its time, but (2) it twists and bends in very new directions: It ends with rejecting child sacrifice in the name of God! God is the very one who intervenes and stops it.
- For us modern people, we are appalled that Abraham almost did what he didn't do. But for ancient hearers of the story, they would have been stunned that Abraham did **not** do what he almost did!

8. Retelling the Story (15 Minutes)

Teacher introduces: Interpreting scripture is hard work! It involves reading between the lines, understanding the historical context, getting a sense of how the story would have been heard by the early Hebrews. Only then can we moderns begin to accurately hear what the story may be trying to say to the modern world.

Story Retelling: Following the rabbinic tradition that suggests Abraham and God are testing each other's faith/trust, each debate team will creatively rewrite this story not as a story of blind faith but faith that welcomes questioning, doubting, reconsidering. Youth can write over the original story handout, or use separate piece of paper to rewrite their version. The following questions may help in reworking the story:

- How might Abraham have behaved differently?
- What if he had thought differently about God?
- What if he had talked this over with Sarah, Isaac's mother? (That faith experiences – like hearing the “voice of God” – may be private but can be shared?)
- What if Isaac had protested?

Use the last 5 minutes for groups to share their reworked versions of this story.

9. Say goodbye until next time: Extinguish the chalice, saying together:

“May the light of truth and the warmth of love go with us in our hearts.”

10. Help clean up classroom before leaving: Please keep regular practice of readying classroom for the next class.

- leave lesson plan and all materials organized
- return blue/yellow stones to containers
- wipe the whiteboard clean
- tables and chairs neatly returned
- nametags collected in Ziploc bag
- leave any comments for RE staff on attendance sheet