

Stories We Can't Just Wish Away Genesis 22:1-14

On Monday, May 12, 2003, Deanna Laney bashed her three children's heads in with a rock. Two of her boys died, the third, a baby, was severely injured. She told authorities that God told her to do it.

Stories like that are exactly why we react so strongly to today's Old Testament reading, the account of the near-sacrifice of Isaac. Decent, respectable parents don't kill their children, and any God who claims to be a decent and respectable God would never command them to do so. The idea that anyone, even the mentally ill, could point to this story to say that God does, indeed, make that sort of decree, is abhorrent to us.

In fact, this story opens an even bigger can of worms; multiple problems and questions are raised for which it has no answers or solutions, at least not in the text itself. What kind of God would tell someone to sacrifice a child? Does God really test people, and if the answer to that is yes, does God really test them by telling them to do horrible, or at least questionable things? Is blind, thoughtless obedience really a quality God looks for, a testament to our faith? And even if we can agree that God does, sometimes, ask us to do things that seem ludicrous or at least unreasonable, how do we learn to discern the voice of God, to judge what is God's voice, and what is the voice of another?

The story, the way it is written, has no interest in any of those questions; it doesn't even seem to be aware that it has raised any of those questions or posed any of those theological problems about the nature of God. The storyteller is completely unaware of the turmoil that he has thrown his readers into.

But, if we can find a way to set aside all of those questions that are raised but not answered, and the troubling picture of God that is unwittingly pitched by the storyteller, there is one legitimate question that the story asks of us that does need to be answered: Why do you love God?

That same question was posed a slightly different way in the book of Job. In Job Satan is the tester, God's quality control guy who roams the face of the earth looking for posers; people who *claim* to be faithful men and women of God, but upon closer inspection really aren't all that they seem, or want to seem to be. And Satan suspects that Job is one of them. He believes that the only reason Job loves God is because of all of the stuff God has given him; the Dugger-sized family and the fabulous wealth and picture-perfect life. So he proposes to God that they find out. Will Job still be devoted to God if they strip him of some of that stuff? What if they strip him of all of it, and all he is left with is his cranky wife and his boils and a handful of friends? Will he still love God when God isn't producing any more?

Walter Brueggeman has a more poignant way of phrasing the question at hand in today's story: who does Abraham love more, the gift or the giver?

Actually, it is a poignant question when it is asked of Abraham; it is bordering on crass when it is asked of us: who do we love more, the gift or the giver? I want that to be an outrageous question. I want the truth of my answer to be self-evident, absolutely defensible: *what do you mean, who do I love more?! Of course I love God more!* I want all of my words and actions to stand behind my declaration so that it is irrefutable. But the truth is that one simple follow-up question might just demonstrate exactly the opposite: What kinds of things make you think about God? Over the course of a day, when do you think about God? When you are facing a challenge you know you can't handle alone and need strength for? When you need the test results to be negative? When your baby is going off in the car all alone for the very first time? When you aren't sure where the money is going to come from?

All excellent times to think about God. But what if the question I had asked you instead was when do you think about your best friend, or your husband or your girlfriend? When you need the trash taken out? When you need help in a class? When you need to borrow a few dollars? They wouldn't be very happy if that was the only time you thought about them, would they? Just when you needed something from them? That would make it sound like the only purpose they served in your life was a utilitarian one. You love them and keep them around because they can do things for you.

But that's not the only time you think about them. You think of them when you see a book or an antique they would like, or when you have a few quiet moments in the middle of your day and they just come to mind, or when you are lonely and wish they were there to keep you company. You love your friends and spouses not because of what they do for you. You love them because of who they are. Because she is compassionate or an understanding listener, or because he loves you even when you are not at your finest, or because she's funny or challenges you and makes you think. It's the qualities they have, the sympathy and love and generosity and gregariousness and the moxie, the creativity and the never-met-a-stranger, or good-in-a-crisis part of their character you love. And if, for some reason, he could never take out the trash again, or she never helped you study for another test, you would still love them, wouldn't you? True, part of the way they show their love is through gifts and favors, but it isn't the gifts and favors you love, it's the person.

So back to that original follow up question: when do you think about God? What kinds of things make God come to mind? When you need help, yes, that's fine, giving us gifts and helping us is one of the ways God shows us that he loves us – gifts and favors, just like we do for each other. But do you ever just stop in the middle of your day and think about how very grateful you are that God has forgiven so much? Do you ever open your eyes in the morning and think that this is a day that God has made, and rejoice in it? When you look at the stunning scenery that surrounds us, does it make you think of the creator with awe and wonder? Do you yearn for God's company? Do you enjoy God's sense of humor, even when you are the butt of it? Do you enjoy times of companionable silence with God, not asking, not telling, just being? Do you think of God at least as often over the course of your day as you do your children, or your best friend, or your mate, or for that matter, food, or sex, or golf or a worrisome problem?

Remember The Shoop Shoop song and that timeless question posed in it, how will I know if he really loves me? Well, flip flop that around: How will you know if *you* really love *God*? Easily enough: is God enough? If the material blessings all dried up, and life got pretty stripped down, and it was just you and God enjoying each other's company, would that be enough?

The question this story asks us to ask ourselves isn't, *what are you willing to sacrifice for God?* but a more basic one about the nature of our relationship with God. What are our love and trust and allegiance based on? Will we call ourselves Christians and be good church-goers as long as the benevolences keep coming, or are we pretty smitten with God, just because he is God? That's what God wants, you know. Not people who know how to follow the rules and do the right things, but people who are just as smitten with God, as God is with them. And that's pretty smitten.