

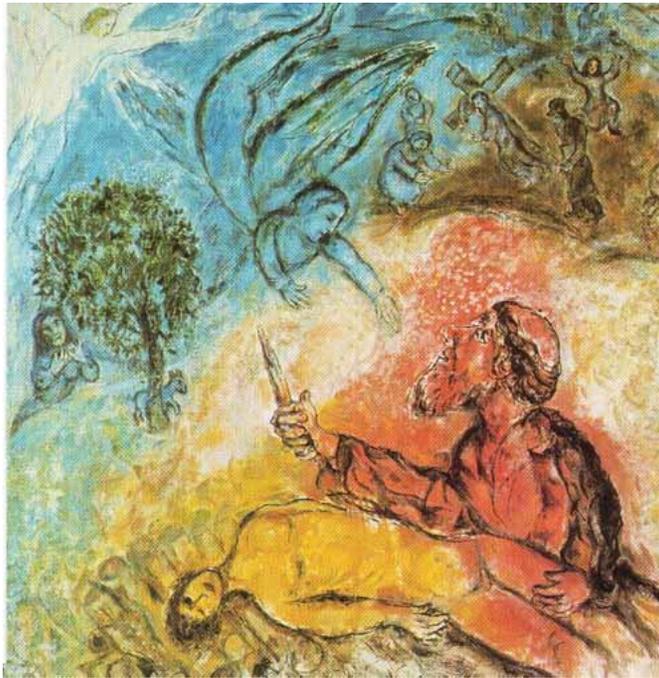
“Akedah: The Hard Principle of Exchanged Life”

July 2, 2017

A Sermon by the Rev. John C. R. Silbert at Trinity Presbyterian Church; Butler, Pennsylvania
The Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

Text: “Isaac said to his father Abraham, ‘Father!’ And he said, ‘Here I am, my son.’ He said, ‘The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?’ Abraham said, ‘God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.’ So the two of them walked on together.”

Genesis 22:7-8; NRSV



[Image Credit: Marc Chagall, “The Sacrifice of Isaac”, 1966, The Musée Marc Chagall, Nice France]

We have this difficult text from Genesis – so many are so difficult for us to read – that we wonder what we are to make of it, and the God of these events that inspire the words committed to paper. Some want to take the Old Testament and ascribe the stuff of it – and the God of it – and relegate them to an earlier time. That the God we see as so demanding and unrelenting in these particular stories in Genesis is altogether different than the God we see and read about in the New Testament. Some may wonder that the seemingly brutal God of Genesis has been replaced by a more congenial God in the New Testament in the person of Jesus.

We’re better now than that, we think, so we need to move on and dwell exclusively in the loving grace of the New Testament . . . But that is wrong-headed thinking. If you think that, you’re wrong; I’m here to tell you that.

God is God. So we’re stuck with this story of Abraham and Isaac.

But before we say too much that is negative about Abraham and what he does in binding his son – imagine taking his son and wrapping him down on the altar? No, we can’t imagine that . . . But as we look with horror on the act, just think through all the ways we do sacrifice our loved ones in pursuit of other things, other gods: the child that has to stay an extra afternoon, or evening in daycare, rather than being at home, because there is an extra demand being levied at work – Granted, we may be trying to do our best in our jobs in order to make our family’s life better – But while we get after Abraham for such a horrible action, here, let’s not forget that we are often making sacrifices in our lives; sometimes it is our families who bear the brunt; sometimes it’s our kids that get sacrificed, our spouse – some other person, near and dear to us; we really do love them, but we are able to cut them off because we are doing something really important, a “have-to” that must get done. So while we look at Abraham with horror, he keeps doing what he keeps doing because he trusts and believes it is God’s call for him; not simply an overbearing boss at work; or the next thing we might want to acquire for ourselves, so we sacrifice others things (or persons) to get it. Let us become circumspect as we look in judgment on Abraham and on what he believes he must do to follow where God calls him.

Let us pray: Our Father and our God make us masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire, for we would see Jesus this morning, in his name and for his sake, we pray, Amen.

This passage from Genesis 22 is known in the community of the Jews as “*the Akedah*” – You see it as the first word of the sermon title for this day. What is the Akedah? It is the Hebrew word for “Binding” – the binding of Isaac.

What follows from this word in the title is the phrase, “*the Hard Principle of Exchanged Life*” and we’ll get to this in a few moments.

The story is troubling on so many different levels. I taught this story at Robert Morris University as part of a course in ethics where we were discussing theological or deistic existentialism . . . I know, we are getting into the weeds . . . But the point is there are those who believe in a non-deistic existentialist philosophy in which the guiding principle is me, alone, with my choices to make; representing one end of a continuum. At the other end of which is a belief that God calls me into actions and choice-making; that my identity flows from my belief that God is calling me into action – a very deistic existentialism, do you see? At the far end we have the highly personalized existentialism represented by the atheist, Jean Paul Sartre; while at this other end, we have this very deistic (God-present) existentialism represented by Søren Kierkegaard, a Danish theologian and thinker of the mid-1800’s. He took as his prime guidance the radical sense of obedience to God in living his life as authentically as he could, taking for his theme this very passage from Genesis 22! This is covered in a book he wrote that explores the ethics of the person of faith which he entitled, “Fear & Trembling: the Sickness unto Death.”

It is no light thing. Maybe we do make the Christian life, the life of faith, too light; there isn’t enough sweat and toil; there isn’t fear and trembling; enough sacrifice.

The Apostle Paul in his Letter to the Philippians says this: “. . . *work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*”ⁱ

So Abraham was following through on God's command . . . *"Take your son, your only son, and sacrifice him to me."*

When I talk to my students about this passage, I am relating it, of course, to Kierkegaard in the sense of the leap of faith. There is no standard within regular give-and-take and human moral law for such a leap of faith as Abraham takes in binding his son to the altar. Kierkegaard says there comes a point in your life when you have to take that leap of faith because there is nothing else that can give you guidance for making that choice! So Abraham does. And what we have, then, is the Akedah, the binding.

As I talk to my student about this passage, I remark, *"Can you imagine what the conversation was going back down the mountain? . . . 'Well, son, I had you going there for a minute didn't I . . .'"* It isn't really funny.

Actually we don't know very much about Isaac relative to Abraham beyond that point except for a story concerning Isaac marrying Rebekah (Genesis 24:1-9) and when he joins his brother, Ishmael, to bury their Father at the end of Abraham's days (Genesis 25:7-11).

This idea of sacrifice is a hard one for us; especially when it involves human sacrifice! *Whoa, that's just not right . . .* But really in one way, the passage actually takes a step away from that idea. All the times in the passage that reference God – until a certain point – use the same word, "Elohim" which, if you remember from Genesis 1, is the generic name for God. *"And God (Elohim) said, 'Let us make humankind in our image . . .'"* (Genesis 1:26) Elohim is in the plural form here – thus we have the words that follow: *"Let us . . ."* And here it is Elohim, Elohim, Elohim, Elohim – all through Genesis 22 until the moment Abraham draws the knife over his son, about to come down, then all of a sudden the word for God is no longer the generic word, but becomes the personal name, "Yahweh"! *"But the angel of the LORD ("Yahweh") called to him from Heaven . . . saying, 'Stop!'"*

It is as if there is a complete redoing of the understanding of sacrifice in the shift from the generic name for God to this very personal name for God. A lot of other cultures in and around where Abraham lived practiced human sacrifice; this was a part of the cultural ways in which they lived. Abraham knew those kinds of practices took place, but all of a sudden there came this shift ethically, morally – “*Not human blood, not your son’s blood, no! Take the ram over there, instead!*” – Abraham then see’s the ram that is caught in the thicket.

There are a couple of things to note. On the one hand, we see this shift away from the idea of human sacrifice in its substitution by the ram of sacrifice – animal sacrifice. Up to this point, there was some need for human sacrifice; somehow human blood did the work of expiation – a fancy word that means “making amends” for something. Yet, though this change comes here in Genesis 22, the idea of sacrifice, itself, isn’t eliminated – It hasn’t gone anywhere!

And on the other hand, Abraham takes his son, Isaac, up to Mount Moriah and binds him on the altar they make there. That place is forever linked to this event because it is what eventually becomes “Temple Mount” in the Holy City of Jerusalem: the site of the First and Second Jewish Temple of Jerusalem and which, today, contains the golden dome of the Islamic Mosque of Omar.



(On left: Temple Mount today, showing the original walls of the Jewish temple, the Mosque of Omar, and the Christian Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Photo by: Godot13 for Wikimedia Commons).

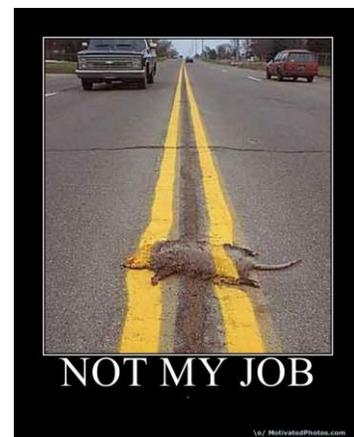
That whole area was the place of the temple in Israel’s sacrificial system; “the Place of Meeting”; a place that was marked by tent poles and fabric cloth out in the desert as the people wandered, before making their

way to the Promised Land of Israel and to its capitol, Jerusalem. The place of the binding – the Akedah – is Mount Moriah – and it becomes Temple Mount! The very place of sacrifice where the people would make atonement for their sins; where the High Priest of the Jews entered on Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement – to offer the blood sacrifice of the unblemished lamb.

The idea of sacrifice is based on *"the Principle of Exchanged Life."* What do I mean? You do not have sacrifice without a loss; without something dying. The principle of exchanged life says, *"My life for yours."*ⁱⁱⁱ I choose to set aside my life in order for you to have life, or to have more life, or to have better life, different life – I make that choice; I substitute. Think about it this way: You see a person burdened by packages walking down the street; you are on your way to some specific engagement – already late – and you see that person struggling along; in a moment you stop to help them in their predicament and die to the fact that you are going to be even later now that you have stopped to help them! You don't have to; it's not your obligation – could you not see the person and say to yourself: *"Ahh, look at that poor guy . . . Can't help him, I'm already late!"* and off you go. . . No, you stop and instead say to the fellow, *"May I help you?"*

In the old days, if the ox-cart fell in the ditch, the fellow with the ox and cart needed help; one didn't pass by (*"Tough break, friend . . ."*). No, one tied off his own animal to a nearby tree, hitched up his clothing and said, *"Well, how will we get this situation fixed?"* And it is that sort of thing that becomes my life for yours. I don't have to help; it's not my job, but I make the sacrifice willingly.

Have you ever seen that poster (viewed to the right)? It is the picture of a dead armadillo on a steamy, hot stretch of Texas



asphalt, in the middle of the road, with freshly painted yellow lines going up and over the carcass on their way down the highway. The caption reads: "NOT MY JOB." The line-painting crew we surmise has a different agenda and cannot be bothered . . .

The principle of exchanged life – a hard principle – says "*My life for yours.*" I will set myself aside for you, and as I do, it means for me a little death. It may not mean much; a couple of extra seconds, or a few extra minutes off of my life, out of my schedule; pulling me away from what I have already planned for myself, and yet, that little bit of dying is in order for someone else to have a little bit of life.

If you think that isn't significant, then you tell me what Jesus means in saying, "*Even a cup of cold water given . . .*" It is part and parcel of life itself.

My professor in college, Dr. Thomas Howard, wrote a book called "*Hallowed Be this House.*" In this book he takes a walk through every room of this house – yes, even the bathroom! – Kitchen, dining room – and he gives a theological overview of the significance of the place that each of us calls home. It is a tremendous book, written by a wonderful person! He begins by talking about the house itself being constructed of four walls and a foundation; the walls themselves are boundaries. He says the boundaries are not simply there as walls of defense to keep things out, they are there to mark out that within the bounds special things happen; things of significance and deep meaning; a "family" happens in here – Just like the Tent of Meeting for Israel became the Temple Mount – Mount Moriah – a boundary area where special things took place in the middle of Israel's common life.

Howard talks less about the walls that separate us from the outside and speaks more of these boundaries as, in fact, bonds that bring us together. He believes that families come together inside these boundaries (the walls of the house) and it is the principle of exchanged life that is uppermost and operative within them – my life for yours. Anybody who has ever raised

children knows that: you set aside a lot of what you want to do because the other needs you.

We do it willingly and it is a dying. There are days when that is NOT what I want to do . . . Jesus implied that even a cup of cold water, given, is part of that principle. He also said, *“Take up your cross and follow me.”*

Look again, now, at the picture by Marc Chagall on the front cover of the sermon. You see Abraham in the foreground with his knife raised up against Isaac, and the Angel of the LORD, reaching out; you see the ram caught behind the tree in the distance. Marc Chagall, the artist, was a Jew . . . And do you see what he has painted in the upper right corner? He has painted Jesus carrying his cross.

The Rabbis of the first century, with no connection to Christianity but with ample experience of Roman executions, said this: *“Isaac carries the wood for the sacrifice like one who carries his own cross.”*ⁱⁱ

“Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. . .” Kierkegaard (and the Apostle Paul) knew that the God with whom we have to do is a God who asks of us everything, absolutely everything . . . and will we lay down our lives for his sake?

Even a cup of cold water offered to someone else is a kind of laying-down of life. Let it begin there, as we do better, day-by-day, in shouldering our crosses for his sake.

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

ⁱ This portion of the quoted Scripture is from Philippians 2:12-13, NRSV.

ⁱⁱ The Principle of Exchanged Life is beautifully articulated in a book by Dr. Thomas T. Howard, my English Literature professor at Gordon college in his book, “Hallowed Be this House,” Harold Shaw Publishers, Wheaton, Illinois; 1976, pp. 22-28.

ⁱⁱⁱ As mentioned by Kathryn Schifferdecker in commentary on Genesis 22 at workingpreacher.org.