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St. John's Episcopal Church, Mount Pleasant  
26<sup>th</sup> June 2011  
Proper 8A

When have you heard the voice of God?

Really. I'm serious. When have you heard the voice of God?

When has the Holy Spirit spoken to you with such strength that you could only say, "Here I am?"

Has it ever happened?

The Old Testament lesson today says it happened to Abraham.

Today's reading is so full of drama yet so lacking in emotion, so full of questions yet so lacking in answers that it nearly begs us to explore and to try to make some sense of it.

In Jewish literature, this passage is known as the Akedah – the binding. It's not called "Isaac's Near Slaughter," it's not called "Abraham's Unemotional Yet Unequivocal Response to God," it's not called "A Boy and His Dad Go to the Countryside." It is "The Binding." And because that's what it's been called for centuries, perhaps that's the place we should start in our exploration.

A brief recap of the story...

God calls to Abraham.

Abraham responds, "Here I am."

God tells Abraham to take up Isaac, the son he loves, to the land of Moriah and offer him as a sacrifice – a burnt offering.

So Abraham takes Isaac, two slaves, some wood – and a very sharp knife.

They travel for three days, and then Abraham sees the destination and tells the slaves to stay put – he and Isaac will climb the mountain.

He loads Isaac up with plenty of wood, and he carries the knife and the fire.

They get to the right place and Isaac asks innocently, "Where's the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham responds, "God will provide..."

And so Abraham builds an altar and lays the wood out for the fire – and he binds Isaac, lays him on the altar and takes the knife to kill his son.

An angel of the Lord calls to him and says "Stop! Now I know that you fear God." Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught in the thicket and Abraham offered the ram to God instead of Isaac.

The story raises *so* many questions...

Is this a simple, straightforward story of Abraham's loyalty, his unswerving obedience, to God? Is it supposed to be an example to us all? Is it a prophetic story of Jesus' crucifixion? Why is Abraham so unemotional? He doesn't argue, doesn't resist... just does what God tells him to do.

Is this a simple, straightforward story of child abuse?

Is it a simple, straightforward story of self-sacrifice?

And where is Sarah, the mother of Isaac?

We aren't told in Scripture how old Isaac is, but a simple chronology would make him an adult, not the adolescent portrayed in art nor the child we assume him to be. Isaac was born when Sarah was ninety, and, as the story goes, Sarah dies fairly soon after the binding. We don't know this for sure – it is conjecture – but if, indeed, Isaac is fully adult, the binding has a new twist. An adult son, surely, could have resisted – but there's nothing in the story to indicate any struggle on Isaac's part. In fact, there is an ancient Jewish *midrash* which has Isaac fully prepared for his sacrifice, saying, "Bind me tight, Father!"

Who is performing the sacrifice... Abraham or Isaac?

Do we have a father willing to murder his child in the name of God? Or do we have a man willing to sacrifice his own life in the name of God?

Think of the violence that has taken place down through the centuries in the name of God. Think of the violence that still occurs in the name of God.

Roman atrocities against the Jews of Palestine

Christian Crusades, slaughtering Muslims

The Holocaust

Iraq

Ireland

Afghanistan

Timor

India

Kashmir

Rwanda

The list goes on, seeming to be endless. Conflict, mayhem, death and destruction in the name of one God or another. It's sickening.

Listening to the voice of God indeed.

I think of all those who have supposedly responded to the voice of God and wonder, "How do we test the voice of God? How do we know that the message we're hearing is *really* the voice of God and not just a bad case of indigestion?"

I suggest to you this: That the test to determine whether the voice you hear is truly the voice of God is the test of love.

If you hear a voice telling you to travel a certain path, test it out: is the path one of love? Or is the path one of my own ego. An answer to my own desires. A path of power, or wealth, or position that might actually jeopardize my own sense of integrity.

Is it the voice of love?

Let me be clear: I do not believe that God intended for Isaac to be slain. That is not the God I believe in. I have no Scripture proof that God was playing some sort of divine trick – but in my heart, God is love – and God does not demand the sacrifice of the innocent.

What if Abraham had said “No”? Well, the fact is that he didn’t. Blindly, without argument, without emotion, he proceeded to comply with God’s command.

They got to the mountain top and Abraham prepared the sacrificial altar. What was Isaac thinking? He surely noticed, for the record says so, that there was no lamb to be slaughtered. “God will provide, my son,” said his father. And so was Isaac resigned to the possibility that he, the son, would be what was provided? That he, the son, would become the sacrificial lamb? It seems to me that it is the *blessing* of Abraham and the *saving* of Isaac that is more important than the obedience, the blind faith, the willingness to sacrifice or be sacrificed. What if this was the paradigm under which religions began to operate? What if this – the blessing – became the model for Jews, Christians, and Muslims?

Could we turn two thousand years of history around?

Could we stop the cycle?

Of course, there are atheists, secularists, non-Abrahamic people who will continue to perpetuate violence and showy martyrdom. And there are people who twist the teachings of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam into a cry for unthinking martyrdom.

But what would happen if the pattern of the Abraham-Isaac story shifted, and instead of carrying the burden of Abraham’s *curse*, we were lifted up by his *blessing*?

I believe it is the blessing of Abraham that lies at the center of our faith. God said, “Stop! Enough! No more bloodshed! Do not harm the boy!” Because God is a God of mercy. Of harmony. Of peace.

A God of love.