

Sermon for Sunday, June 29, 2014 Genesis 22:1-14 "A Voice Unheard"

We continue in our readings from the Hebrew Bible this morning with another chapter in the story of Abraham, a hard one for us to hear, to be sure. Asking a father to sacrifice his only legitimate son and heir? To kill the one for whom he and his wife had waited so long? It seems incomprehensible that God would ask this.

And as I read the story once again, I'm struck by the one voice that isn't heard in the story.

We hear all about Abraham and how God told him he must sacrifice his son, the son that he loved, how he went up the mountain, a long trek, the boy's heart-rending question: "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering," the angel showing up in the nick of time, the ram in the thicket that serves as the offering...

We hear many voices, but one is missing. The obvious one: the mother of this beloved boy Isaac. Sarah, the one who laughed when she heard she would have a son in her old age. The mother of nations.

Silent? Or did she have no idea what was going to happen on that mountain?

The only clues we have are in the aftermath. In the very next chapter, she dies apart from her husband and child, in Canaan. Abraham has to go to the place where she has died and purchase a burial place from the Hittites. She is estranged from her family. Suffice to say, this is not a happy clan and this is most likely not a happy woman. No more laughter now. Was the incident on the mountain a part of that story?

How could it not be? At some point she learns about what happened, and that triggers an estrangement from Abraham, and thereafter, her death.

We don't hear her voice in the Scriptures, but we can imagine her sharing her story with other women: "After a long life, after a miracle of sorts, I had my beautiful Isaac. My gift of laughter, not because Abraham laughed when God made the promise. Not because I laughed when the strangers said it would happen. Just because he was my joy, my little love.

"And then Abraham took my little love on a trip. He didn't tell me about it, except to say that it was what young boys did with their fathers. Just a little camping trip with some of the other young men. He didn't say this was something that God had insisted upon.

"I learned later that Abraham had taken my boy up a mountain and intended to murder him as a sacrifice required by God. He said that God told him to kill Isaac. God didn't even use his name, just kill him, like he was a lamb to be sacrificed. A piece of meat to be burnt on the altar. "

Can you imagine the rage that Sarah must have felt? To have no choice, to know nothing of what Abraham was going to do with the most precious thing in her life? What mother wouldn't be enraged? Is it any wonder that her story ends so?

One of the midrashes on the story of Sarah's death, a commentary by ancient rabbis on the text, suggests this very conclusion to the story: "At that time, Satan went to Sarah and appeared to her in the guise of Isaac. When she saw him, she said to him: My son, what has your father done to you?"

He answers her: My father took me up hill and down dale, up to the top of a certain mountain, he built an altar, arranged the wood, bound me on top of it, he took the knife to slaughter me, and if God had not said, "Don't stretch out your hand," I would already have been slaughtered. He did not finish telling the story before she died." (Tanhuma Vayera 23)

Rabbi Rona Shapiro suggests that Sarah is overcome with a grief so powerful that it kills her, while Abraham seems to carry out God's orders unflinchingly. But perhaps Sarah dies because she knows the sacrifice is wrong. She knows that God would not ask this. If relationship is the way we know God, why would God destroy relationship? Sarah knows about relationship, but Abraham does not. He has already demonstrated this: he abdicated responsibility vis-à-vis her contentious relationship with Hagar and Ishmael. It takes Abraham's nearly killing Isaac for him to realize the significance of this son to him.

Shapiro believes that Sarah's death says that this trip to the mountaintop is unnecessary. There is no truth on the mountain. Truth is right here, at home, cooking dinner, doing the quotidian things. Deuteronomy says "Truth is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart." (Deut 30:11-14)

Sarah dies knowing the truth that Abraham learns only with her death. He never again talks to God. God never talks to him. Instead, he remarries, fathers more children, lives what appears to be a much more boring life than the one he lived before. With Sarah's death, he finally realizes that relationship is where one finds the truth that is God.

We wrestle with a text like this, wondering if it is an example of Abraham's great faith and obedience or yet another example of how Abraham gets it all wrong. Is this a test from God or a time that Abraham misunderstands the instructions? We cannot know for sure, but we can recognize that we human beings sometimes make assumptions about what God wants. If these assumptions do not fit the whole of what God has revealed about Godself, maybe we're not reading God right. Maybe we are hearing our own egos, our own fears, rather than God's instructions.

There's a reason God stays Abraham's hand. He does not expect Abraham to do this thing. Yes, it might be that Abraham has proved his obedience and God now trusts the patriarch. Or maybe, just maybe, this very human man has once again misread God's intentions – as we ourselves sometimes do – and it is only through the reaction of his wife, the child's mother, that he finally realizes how wrong he has been.

And maybe the faith that is shown here is not so much obedience to an outrageous demand by God, but admission that he was wrong, that God would have never expected such a thing, that the boy's mother was right. She knew. Relationships are where we learn about God's love, and where truth lives. Not in a knife. Not on a mountain. Not in murder.

No, God's love and God's truth are found in life, as ordinary as the supper table. In life, as mundane as a kiss before sleep. In life, as lacking in mountaintop glow as the laundry room in the basement.

God is found in life, not death. Truth is found in relationship, not in homicide. Listen for what God says and test what we think we hear against those statements. Sarah did, as painful as it was. We should, too. Amen.