

## God doesn't want us to hurt anyone:

### Abraham's Call to Sacrifice Isaac

Sermon by Fred Unruh for Lethbridge Mennonite Church 1,285 words

Genesis 22: 1-19

[Richard J. Fairchild provides some of the insights for my sermon this morning.]

This is a shocking story, a terrible story!  
And we today, as people in centuries gone by,  
have problems understanding it;  
problems interpreting it.

Jewish scholars, and Christian scholars, and Muslim scholars  
have debated this story through the centuries.  
So have people like you and I.

I don't have the perfect interpretation,  
but I will offer my response to this incredible narrative.

This story is about God, and about our ancient father Abraham.  
It evokes deep feelings that fuel our questions.  
Did God really ask Abraham to sacrifice his son?  
Does God bless human sacrifice?

### Human Sacrifice

Human sacrifice has been practiced in many cultures.  
People were told to believe that human sacrifice was necessary  
to keep their gods happy,  
to grow good crops,  
and to help them avoid disasters like earthquakes or starvation.

Some gods needed many sacrifices to keep them pacified.  
Early Egyptian royalty took most of the members of their households,  
including servants and concubines, with them into the next world.  
A Chinese legend says there are thousands of people  
entombed in the Great Wall of China.

We remember that Abraham' ancestors lived in Ur of the Chalees,  
among a people who worshiped many gods,  
some of whom demanded human sacrifices.

So one of the faith issues with which Abraham struggles,  
is whether his God, who called them to seek a land of promise,  
requires human sacrifice to fulfill God's expectations.  
He remembers the Chaldean gods demanded human sacrifice,  
so what about his God?

This is a very difficult test of faith for Abraham.  
This test is not about whether Abraham has faith,  
nor how great is his faith,  
but about what God wants from those who believe and follow.

As the story unfolds **strong feelings** emerge:  
Our sense of horror as Abraham sets out on his trek,  
his son Isaac beside him.

We imagine Isaac as a young lad but we really don't know.  
According to some Jewish commentators,

Isaac was a young adult already aware of life's dangers.

The awful suspense when,  
near to the end of that journey,  
we hear Isaac ask his old father ...  
"Father, the fire and the wood are here,  
but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"

We tremble as we hear Abraham's response,  
with what seems to be an evasive lie,  
"God will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son."

Then - our huge sense of relief, when,  
as the knife is about to descend,  
an angel speaks and (stops) Abraham's hands,  
and indeed provides an alternate sacrifice for Abraham.  
Surely God's mercy and compassion are evident here!

Powerful emotions and difficult thoughts are evoked;  
thoughts and feelings about God,  
thoughts and feelings about Abraham.

For all these years Abraham, with Sarah,  
have been on their quest for the promised land,  
he has been trying to understand  
what God wants from him.

Sometimes Abraham has felt close to God.  
Out there under the stars, dreaming of their future,  
but other times God and God's ways were unclear.

Abraham remembers what the gods in Ur of the Chaldees demanded.  
Maybe his God of the Promise demands the same?

We're not told how Abraham first encountered The Test.  
He didn't discuss it with Sarah,  
who was often more perceptive than he was.  
He didn't explain The Test and any reasons for it,  
with Isaac, who was vitally involved.

The story tells us Abraham,  
apparently on his own,  
concluded that God expected him  
to sacrifice his son, to prove his faithfulness.  
Had he asked Sarah or Isaac perhaps he would have  
understood God's will more completely!

When asked by his son about the lamb for the sacrifice,  
Abraham answers, "God will provide".

This is either great faith, or a desperate plan  
to appease a God he did not understand.

Perhaps I should not be so hard on Abraham!

We have tests that come to us almost daily,  
tests when we are not sure what we should do,  
or how to respond to extreme challenges.

**Confessing our false gods**

We too often stumble as we seek God's way for our lives.  
We confess our struggles with false gods.

We confess that too often we accept the powerful influence  
of our secular culture that glorifies "redemptive violence",  
and proudly boasts of new technology to wage war.  
We're pounded daily by the seductive lure of "redemptive violence"  
where good guys kill bad guys so we win the victory.

We confess we allow violent video games  
like "Call to Arms" and "Halo 3" or "The Assassin's Creed"  
that indoctrinate our children in the philosophy of "redemptive violence".  
These video games are exciting, competitive, and incredibly evil.  
They teach our children that compassion is weakness,  
and violence is strength.  
We say "It's just a game" while our children are violated by evil.

This week first day sales of the video game  
"Call to Duty: Modern Warfare 2" broke sales records,  
raking in an estimated \$310 million in North America  
and the United Kingdom alone.  
Violent video games are Big Money Makers!

We confess we live in an economy that thrives  
on "disaster capitalism" that generates wars to make money,  
and then promises more money will be made  
rebuilding what we destroyed during the war we instigated.  
With powerful proponents like Bill Cheney,  
the gad called "disaster capitalism" is strong and fueling our economy.

The test that confronted Abraham,  
to sacrifice human life,  
comes to us on almost a daily basis.  
False gods demanding many human sacrifices  
promise prosperity built on human suffering.

We struggle to overcome their power.  
We pray almost every Sunday,  
"lead us not into the time of trial, but deliver us from evil."  
That's a good prayer.  
We need God's help to be delivered from these fierce gods.

One Bible commentator notes that this ordeal involving Isaac  
is not the first time Abraham has dealt with human sacrifice.  
Indeed, at Sarah's urging, Abraham sent his first born,  
Ishmael, and his mother,  
into the desert as a sacrifice to keep peace with his wife.  
Maybe that's why Abraham didn't discuss his faith dilemma with her?

Fortunately God rescued Ishmael and his mother from certain death,  
and gave us a major clue as to what God wants.  
We name it - **mercy and compassion.**  
Abraham was still learning about compassion.  
So are we.

We pray that we may never have this terrible test;  
that no one would ever ask of us -  
in the name of God - to give up our children.  
Passionately we pray "Deliver us from this evil."

Bruce Chilton, an Episcopal priest and educator has written,

“Any voice that calls us back to the mount of human sacrifice,  
in whatever form it takes  
in its myriad disguises is not God’s (voice).

“It is time for us, whether believers or not,  
to come down to the place of promise,  
where we can see that no moral value  
attaches to sacrificing human life for any cause,  
with the possible exception of one’s own.”

(Christian Century, June 3, 2008, pp. 35, quoted by Walter Brueggemann)

Human sacrifice is not God’s will.  
Fortunately, Abraham learned this  
before he killed his beloved sons.

Ralph Milton wrote a fitting conclusion  
to his telling of this Biblical story.  
I’m sure you remember it.  
We read “God doesn’t want us to hurt anyone.”

I offer you his conclusion for this incredible story.  
**“God doesn’t want us to hurt anyone.”**

May God’s Spirit empower us to engage others  
with mercy and compassion.

Amen