

The Face of Mitigating Trust

Genesis 22:1-14

Isaac must have been a psychologically scarred young man. His profile would read like a pathology report in a therapist's notebook:

- He was an unexpected “miracle child” born to parents late in life;
- He was coddled by his overbearing and insecure mother, Sarah;
- His homelife was constantly shifting, with nomadic parents suffering delusions of grandeur of producing a multitude of nations and claiming ownership of a land that wasn't theirs;
- His immediate rival was his stepbrother, Ishmael, from a relationship his father had with “the other woman;”
- Then his father manipulated him to gain his trust, all with the intent of killing him, certain that God was compelling him to do it.

Okay, exactly where does the family therapy begin?

Honestly, it makes you wonder how this story might have been told from Isaac's point of view. Do you think this family had some serious trust issues in their relationships?

Nineteenth century British philosopher, Anne Besant, observed the moral absurdity of this narrative:

Everyone knows the beautiful story of Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac. How this noble father led his child to the slaughter; how Isaac meekly submitted; how the farce went on till the lad was bound and laid on the altar, and how God then stopped the murder, and blessed the intending murderer for his willingness to commit the crime.

That pretty much sums it up. Despite the tendency of Christians, in particular, to read this metaphorically as a foreshadowing of Jesus' death on the cross, even with that overlay, this story is perplexing.

Yes, we know the narrator explains to the reader that God was merely testing Abraham and so we can anticipate the happy ending. But remove that foreknowledge (which we presume the characters didn't possess) and we're left with a rather startling and horrible human experience—a father believes he hears the voice of God telling him to kill his son and offer him as a sacrifice! How do you think that plays out in Peoria? If we read about this online or in the newspaper, would we respond to it in the same way? Would our visceral reaction to the events described fill us with warm thoughts of selfless sacrificial love or leave us stone cold with horror? I suspect the latter.

This is why I often wonder if the stories of Scripture can even speak to us today in quite the same manner as they did to audiences in the past. Our human values and perspectives on life, as well as cultural contexts, are significantly different as our moral sensibilities have evolved through time. We mislead ourselves when we assume we can take the Bible literally and apply it without filters and adaptive measures. It just doesn't translate well. Sometimes, the actions and examples of biblical characters are egregious, horrific, and disturbing—a contrast to what we sense is moral and just.

This is one of the stories that haunt me. As a straight-forward reading, it doesn't translate well for explanation. Frankly, the moral logic is harder to discern and follow than it appears. For one thing, are we to conclude that God tests the faith of people with cruel, deceptive tactics like he did with Abraham—one that risked the life of

his child? Is this what we're to believe? Is that our theology? Even the Israelites and Jesus weren't tested like this in the wilderness. What is this story saying about God?

Then, what about Abraham? What possible consequences did he fear from God that would trump the loss of his son? What did he fear—that God would take his own life? That's a part of the story that's hard to understand. A few chapters earlier Abraham pleaded with God to save the city of Sodom; couldn't he question this command and stand up to save the son he loved? As a parent, how could he blindly trust the voice in his head and heart compelling him to sacrifice his child? How do you do that? If he didn't question that command, what kind of father was he?

Besides, what if Abraham had followed through with this slaughter, if somehow he didn't get the message to stop, cease, and desist; then how would it have turned out? With Isaac dead, would Abraham have been rewarded by God for being obedient? Under what law or Gospel would that fall? With the blood of the innocent on his hands, would Abraham have been able to live with himself, let alone be able to confess his terrible deed to Sarah?

The bottom line is, something doesn't add up. What would God expect a person like Abraham to do or to feel after going through this experience? Was this really a spiritual test, or did the writer have to bring in God in order to justify Abraham's dire act? Do we really believe Abraham felt blessed simply because he was willing to kill his son out of fear of God?

Then, of course, there's the character of Isaac. What trust could he ever have in his father after this series of events? How naively he

followed his father's direction and accepted uncritically his explanation for their journey to Mt. Moriah. How would Isaac look back on that day and come to terms what he had faced? There's even the cruelty of making Isaac carry the wood for his own funeral pyre! Was there a darker side to his father that was now becoming evident? How could he trust him after this? Children who are abused by parents tend to still love their parents, even though their experience of love is distorted by the harm they've suffered. It's tragic to imagine, and one can only assume Isaac and Abraham's relationship was never the same ever again.

When it comes down to it, for this story to make any sense to us today, if you and I are to believe that this is a story telling us something about God, then we have to reconcile the manipulative, deceitful, and demanding characterization of the Lord in this story with the more praiseworthy image of God being loving, merciful, and kind. They don't reconcile easily. If this story isn't about God, but only the characters themselves, then we have to conclude this was a family in crisis—over their relationships, their heartbreak and disappointment, and their religious sensibilities. Either way, there's no room left for naïveté and a sense of innocent trust. No one escapes scrutiny here, including the portrait we have of God. This is not a story that's easy to interpret, which is why traditional Christian interpretations bypass the difficulties and romantically link it to God sacrificing his only begotten Son on the cross. To be honest, I'm not certain this story foreshadows anything!

Not surprisingly, the Jewish tradition interprets it differently, referring to this story as the *Akedah*, or “binding,” which for them

symbolically displays the “binding” of Jews throughout history, from slavery in Egypt to the Holocaust—they being like Isaac. One can appreciate the theological and spiritual despair as if God was continually threatening their survival as a people with hardships that have largely defined their collective destiny. Perhaps, that is also why, in the Qur’an, the story for Muslims is not about Isaac, but rather Ishmael, who is nearly sacrificed by Abraham—that, too, rendering a provocative meaning that has shaped a collective destiny in Islam.

In any case, the nature of this saga provokes a variety of responses. The question isn’t whether or not the story is true. No one knows; ancient stories are always mythical in form. As individuals, what we might ask is, is this story true for me? Do I find myself somewhere in the mix of characters and experience of this narrative? Is a thread of my own life pulled into this tragic plot? It’s quite likely many of us might say, yes.

For instance, in my experience, some religious people can often be rather naïve about the manner of God. I was like this as a young adult. They interpret faith as being unquestioning, blind trust, where spirituality is more about strict obedience and following rules and commandments than anything else. They operate out of a moral dualism, evaluating their world in black and white terms, right or wrong, and good versus evil. There are no gray areas. Much like Abraham, their sense of the divine is somewhat two-dimensional, where God loves and is merciful to those who are good children, obedient to their Father in heaven, and fearful of the consequences if

they fail to act accordingly. It's a simple, easy moral template. In some ways, Abraham's faith seems similar.

Though, many of us might reject that particular construct of faith, it doesn't mean we can't be stubborn when we believe we are morally right or compelled by God to do or say something harsh and critical to someone because we're convinced they deserve our "prophetic" word. Or maybe we perceive a risky choice of ours to be divinely inspired without pausing to check the faces of those who will be directly impacted. We march ahead with blind trust cocksure that everything is meant to be as God would have it without checking to see if it truly is.

My point being, often we "trust God's will" when it aligns with our own sensibilities and less so when it doesn't. Abraham was all set to assume God wanted him to sacrifice Isaac without ever questioning to see if that were true. Maybe the divine "test" was to see if Abraham would actually challenge the voice he thought he heard! Through personal experience I know it seems the only way God can get us off our high horses, or slow us down, or get us out of our own head long enough to rethink what we're about to do is by making us look into the faces of those who are on the receiving end of our actions. When those on the receiving end of things are not as convinced we're right or that it's an inspired choice, their resistance is likely meant to mitigate our actions. In the parlance of the story, if the "Abrahams" of this world who are mindlessly driven by their sense of devotion to God would pause long enough to face the "Isaacs" they are about to harm, maybe fewer people would suffer from the self-righteous lunacy of religious fanatics!

In my reinterpretation of the story, the “trust” that Abraham appeared to have in God should have been questioned and mitigated by reality and especially the potential horror of his actions directed toward his own child, who at that moment was only a pawn in his father’s self-righteous pursuit. If Abraham’s faith was being tested, as I see it, it was not over his fear of God, but of his conscience and moral sensibilities before God. In my opinion, the narrator got it wrong: Abraham actually failed the test. Had he not been stopped, had the angel of the Lord not intervened, it would have been a tragedy that would have destroyed Abraham’s soul and taken with it whatever faith he had ever had. God actually saved Abraham and his faith from his own destructive zeal!

In a similar way, at times you and I might find ourselves in Isaac, who no longer could naively trust his father’s sensibilities or intentions. He likely still loved him—a child doesn’t tend to lose love, only faith in a parent when they fail to consider their child’s perspective and feelings. Often, as human beings we naively trust each other without recognizing that human love is shaped by internal needs that may easily blemish the purity of motives or intent behind actions. We blind ourselves to what people are really like because we want them to be the person we need them to be.

As a result, blind trust gets people hurt and burned, as it nearly did for Isaac. Children get manipulated in their innocence and taken advantage of when they’re vulnerable; spouses overlook unmet needs in their marriage and lose love before they realize it; too many of us fail to see how fallible and weak and misguided the strong people in our lives are—the ones we admire and look up to and depend upon

with little accountability. The “Isaacs” of this world need to open their eyes to realize Abraham doesn’t always have their best interests at heart.

Don’t misunderstand. This isn’t to say we shouldn’t cultivate trust with one another. What is needed is trust that is wise and discerning, honestly candid and mitigated by the recognition of sinfulness: that we are all human, subject to mistakes and selfish impulses, limited understanding, and emotional factors that may distort and undermine even the best of intentions—even the basic trust of our closest relationships. As I see it, Abraham needed to look into Isaac’s face to remember the love he had for his son which might have then mitigated his driven sense that God was testing him, as if God were competing for his love. Likewise, Isaac should have peered into Abraham’s agonized eyes enough to question what was in his father’s heart instead of uncritically imagining his father’s intentions as he wanted them to be. It’s a story about two loves—a father’s for his son and a son’s for his father—that were both tested for their maturity and skills of discernment in the face of moral conflicts and human failure, just like it is for all of us.

Where was and is God in all of this? Exactly where we find God in our own lives—somewhere in the mitigated trust of their knowing, just as easy and as hard to discern as ever, yet present with the love and the grace that saves us.

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