

Sermon for Sunday, July 2, 2023
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
“Ask the Questions”
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Decorah, Iowa

[Click here to read the story for today.](#)

Beloved people of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Recently a school board in Utah decided that the *Bible* should be removed from elementary school libraries. Utah has a new law banning “pornographic or indecent” materials in public school settings. In an attempt to undermine that law, a parent made the case that the Bible should be banned. After all, she argued, the Bible contains descriptions of incest, prostitution, rape, infanticide. The majority of the school board sided with her. Not surprisingly, the decision is being appealed.

That whole situation has helped me think differently about the story of God asking Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. I’ve sometimes wondered if we should even read it anymore, especially in public worship with kids present. It’s so troubling. What kind of God would ask this of Abraham and put Isaac through this? Even if there was a larger plan, why traumatize Isaac by asking his father to bind him and hold a knife up to him? Why does Abraham agree so readily? Why doesn’t he protest?

I’m concerned about how this story has been heard and used throughout the centuries. How does it sound to survivors of abuse and violence? How often has it been used to justify religious extremism? An attitude of *I must fear God before all else* has led people to neglect and harm those who get in the way of such single-minded devotion. There is a lot of evidence that this story helped the Jewish people move away from the common ancient practice of child sacrifice. God provided a ram showing God does not desire the death of children. Still, many argue that this story has done irreparable harm and should never be heard again.

The recent discussions about banning books are giving me a new perspective on this story. When there are things that make us uncomfortable - in our scriptures, in our society, in our own lives - it’s tempting to avoid them or push them away. But does that help? Does it work to push family secrets under the rug? Is it good to keep children from learning painful stories? We often do that these days, but how is it working out for us and for the kids?

What happens when we face what is hard with curiosity, with compassion together? This week, I’ve been curious about Isaac’s role in this story. Often, we focus on what God may have been trying to teach Abraham through this whole ordeal. But then Isaac just becomes an abstraction, an object lesson, rather than a person, a child. It seems important to pay at-

tention to the child in this story. Abraham does that. Even as he is responding to God, he is also responding to his son.

Maybe you caught this when we read the story together. God calls to Abraham twice and both times, Abraham says, "Here I am." Isaac also calls to him, and Abraham responds the same way, "Here I am." Abraham attends to the voice of God as well as the voice of his son. It's interesting, too, that Isaac does have a voice in this story. He speaks. He asks a question, 'Where is the lamb for the burnt offering, father?' I picture Abraham wincing at Isaac's question, thinking "Ugh ... I was hoping to keep this from him a bit longer", hoping he wouldn't notice the missing animal just yet.

But kids often pick up on a lot more than we realize. They don't miss much. Kids in our day also ask difficult questions: questions about gun violence, racism, climate change, about what kind of future we are leaving them. How are we attending to what they ask of us? Will we try to silence their questions, their voices? Will we seek to shield them from pain, try to pretend it doesn't exist?

Abraham's child asks a painful question that points the way forward. "Where is the lamb ... father?" Abraham responds, "God will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." I wonder if Abraham is surprised by what comes out of his own mouth. I wonder if Isaac's question and his response help him begin to trust, begin to hope that maybe God will provide, maybe he doesn't have to provide everything himself.

I wonder if Abraham needed Isaac's painful, revealing question. I wonder what questions we need today? How can we welcome uncomfortable observations, painful revelations, hard questions, rather than avoiding them or pushing them away? How can we stay with what unsettles us? How can we respond, "Here I am," to God and to others, even when we feel uncertain and afraid?

This is a place, a community, where we can ask hard questions about God, our lives, the life of the world, the future. This is a community where we can be with what is uncomfortable - breathing with it, praying with it, staying with it - where we can bring all that troubles us to God. This is a community where we can begin, again and again, to trust, to hope, to discover the ways that God does provide.

Here we are assured that God doesn't shy away from what's hard. God faces it head on. Our Heavenly Father knows what it is to give his own son, to witness his son's death. Jesus knows what it is to suffer. The Spirit shares in our own weakness.

We are not alone.

We are accompanied, every step of the way, by the God who provides.

We can practice compassion and curiosity, trust and hope, together.