

Highway 61

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Journey Through Genesis VII

1 Peter 1:3-9

Genesis 22:1-14

*Oh God said to Abraham, "Kill me a son."
Abe said, "Man, you must be puttin' me on."
God said, "No," Abe said, "What?"
God said, "You can do what you wanna,
But the next time you see me comin' you better run."
Well Abe said, "Where do you want this killin' done?"
God said, "Out on Highway 61."*

The shock of those words is as strong for me now as it was the first time I heard Bob Dylan sing them decades ago. The verse is as acidic as the voice of the songwriter himself, capturing the frightful nature of this stunning story.

It is so well-known, so singular a tale in Scripture that Jewish tradition has given it its own name, the *akedah*, "the binding of Isaac." Volumes of commentary have been written about its meaning: How could God have asked the faithful Abraham to sacrifice his only son, the one given to him when he and Sarah were well past their child-bearing years? And this was not simply any child. This was the child of the Promise, the one to give rise to the children of Israel. And why would God have reneged on the deal he had made with Abraham and Sarah when he asked them to leave hearth and home to travel to distant, unknown lands if now the whole thing was going to be blown to bits by a horrific act of murder?

It's hard to fathom the God I know asking any father to sacrifice his son, even the devoted Abraham. I don't know that I could pass that test. I'm not sure I'd even take it.

Yet, maybe in a way all of us take it. Especially those of us who seek to live according to our religious convictions. We all make sacrifices to remain faithful. Not every day, of course. Most of the time we get to live really good lives. But for all of us there have been, and will be, occasions when we will make choices as families that are consistent with our beliefs, times when our children will not be able to do or to have some things that other kids have. And that sort of sacrifice is not a bad lesson to teach our kids, even if our kids don't always understand it at the time.

So maybe the question for all of us is not, will we sacrifice our children? The question is, to which god, upon which altar, will we sacrifice them? On the altar of the false gods that surround us or to the one true God who may ask us to do some challenging things, things we don't think we even *can* do, yet which will bring the greatest good to us and those we love?

Interestingly, there are those who defend God's actions in this story. In the context of the ancient world, where child sacrifice was not uncommon, that Abraham would have felt it faithful to obey God and "bind" Isaac may not have been so outrageous as we think it today. What *was* unusual was that God stopped the slaughter of the innocent and thus emblazoned into Jewish tradition the sanction against any form of human sacrifice.

I remember once seeing a video version of the Bible that depicted this story in harrowing detail. I was part of a mixed group of children and adults. All of us in the class watched silently as the drama unfolded. The dialogue was in Hebrew with English subtitles and the setting was quite authentic. Old Abraham struggled up the windswept, ragged Mount Moriah, knife under his coat, his 11 year-old son trudging silently behind him. They arrive at the place of the killing, where the altar is prepared and the disbelieving boy is bound. Finally, the bronze blade is raised, the boy's black eyes flash with terror---and the voice comes. The knife is stayed, a ram cries from the thicket and it is over.

"Who knows what the word 'sacrifice' means?" I asked.

"I know what that means," piped up one little girl. "My Daddy and Mommy are doctors and they help sick people feel better."

"And how is that a sacrifice?" I wanted to know.

"I go to the day care center after school. Sometimes on Saturdays too. Sometimes we have pancakes, though."

We all understood perfectly well what she was saying.

An older woman then spoke about how upset she was that her son and his wife were going off to Africa to be missionaries and taking her only grandchild with them. We got that message, too.

The Greeks called faith "the divine madness." Maybe God was mad to tell Abraham to sacrifice his son. Maybe Abraham was mad to listen. Maybe there is a bit of divine madness whenever we follow God in faith or believe that God has somehow spoken to us.

Still, how ironic it is that we who live under the specter of so much violence and bloodshed, who regularly offer our children to gods far less worthy than the God of Abraham, that we should be critical of this old man and his God. Abraham knew that a disordered, violent, chaotic age needs more than a comfortable God. We need a God who counts for something and who asks of us more than nothing. A God who has the strength to counter the madness we humans can devise and demands the very best we have to offer.

Our God is real and requires real things of us. Our God is about serious business and wants all of us, not just what is easy to give. And so Peter in his letter talks about how our faith can be tested by the trials of life and those who oppose or don't understand us. Think of it not really as a test, Peter says, but as a refining fire that purifies and strengthens us.

The true irony of this story is that God gives far more than God asks. The one who was ready to give his very best, upon whom he had pinned all his hopes and dreams, receives through his faithfulness progeny beyond his wildest dreams. The father who was willing to sacrifice became father of a great people.

The same holds for us. Just when we thought all was lost and the demands of life are too great, a ram appears in the thicket and we are spared. God provides a way where there seemed to be no way. Hope returns, life is renewed, and our story goes on.

The sky darkens, the wind howls, a young man walks up another Mount Moriah, driven by a God who demands everything and stops at nothing. Unlike Abraham, this man carries a cross on his back rather than a knife in his hand. Like Abraham, he is obedient to a God who asks great things of us, but a God who provides great things in return. Body broken, blood shed for our salvation.

A God we meet out on Highway 61.