

# Sacrifice, Part 1

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The Reverend Casey Thompson  
Idlewild Presbyterian Church

Our scripture lesson this morning is from Genesis 21:8-21. Listen for a word from God:

<sup>8</sup> *The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned.* <sup>9</sup> *But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac.* <sup>10</sup> *So she said to Abraham, “Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.”* <sup>11</sup> *The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son.* <sup>12</sup> *But God said to Abraham, “Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you.”* <sup>13</sup> *As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.”*

<sup>14</sup> *So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.* <sup>15</sup> *When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes.* <sup>16</sup> *Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, “Do not let me look on the death of the child.”* *And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept.* <sup>17</sup> *And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is.”* <sup>18</sup> *Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.”* <sup>19</sup> *Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.* <sup>20</sup> *God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow.* <sup>21</sup> *He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.*

The Word of our Lord. Thanks be to God.

Father Abraham had many kids,  
And many kids had father Abraham,  
I am one of them and so are you,  
So let's all watch our backs.

Last Sunday, on Abraham's kitchen table in heaven, millions of father's day cards mountain-topped the oak frame, spilling onto the floor like a cardboard avalanche— after all, we all claim to be his spiritual children — but I suspect the cards from his two corporeal kids, Ishmael and Isaac, were absent from the heap — unsigned, unsent, forlorn on their own tables. This is a two part sermon, a look at the strained histories behind those unconsummated cards, the histories of two children who wondered if their father was safe. Conveniently, for you, today is part one. Next week, part two. Two parallel stories, two sacrifices, Ishmael and Isaac, the two sons of Abraham, the second worst father in all of scripture.

Today, we'll draw close to Ishmael, the son we forget, the son we prune from the family tree, the son we villainize if we're forced to discuss him.

Genesis calls him "a wild ass of a man." Paul called him "a child for slavery." But Abraham called him "son."

Though he called him son, he sacrificed him, just as he sacrificed Isaac, the one we'll weep over, and rightly so, when we read his text next week.

The more I read these texts though, the more I wonder if Abraham committed the cardinal sin of parenting, the more I wonder if Abraham favored a child — a child, we find to our surprise, that is Ishmael. If you place these two stories next to each other, the story of Ishmael's abandonment and the story of Isaac's sacrifice, you will see that Abraham will argue about dismissing Ishmael into the wilderness of Beer Sheba but stands mute in rebuttal of the sacrifice of Isaac. You will see in the story that interpolates that Abraham is deeply informed about the life-sustaining well he sends Ishmael off to in the wilderness of Beer Sheba, and that when he travels down the mountain from his near sacrifice of Isaac (alone perhaps?), he returns to the place he abandoned Ishmael — he returns to the wilderness of Beer Sheba, as if waiting on word from his son.

One son, Isaac, is to carry the plan of God, and one son, Ishmael, is to carry Abraham's heart.

Father Abraham had many kids  
And many kids had father Abraham,  
Isaac was one of them, and Ishmael too,  
But he's the lonely one.

Ishmael grows up without a father, a story common in our day for a variety of reasons — some of them good ones. But Ishmael grows up lonely because he's caught in the crossfire of God's plan and Sarah's machinations. The story is set on the feast day. Abraham throws a party, and if you've ever suffered through a weaning, you can understand why. Abraham's family celebrates a moment of transition in the life of his second son, one who's probably three or four at this point. Is there jealousy here, like in the story of the prodigal with the elder son? Does Ishmael have a party? Does a slave's son rate cake and streamers on his weaning day? Even if he's the first born? When he plays with Isaac on the feast day does latent anger bleed through, does he get a little rough, a little inappropriate? The Hebrew word suggests he might have, a nearly fatal choice for a child caught in the affairs of adults. Ishmael represents everything about Sarah she didn't think she could accomplish, and to see her worst fears interact with her greatest joy, in a way that may suggest dominance, in a way that certainly suggests a threat to her son ...

"Send him away," she says. "I won't have that brat inherit instead of Isaac." Sarah doesn't employ those words but she employs that subtext.

The matter was evil to Abraham and the text chivalrously omits his reply. He takes the matter up with God, however, and again the text merely shows us the culmination of their conversation: "Do not think it evil," God commands, "Do what Sarah wants. Ishmael is not the son I have chosen. I will take care of him because of your love for him, but Isaac is the child I choose."

And what do you do then? When a child you love desperately must leave you? Here, another song about Abraham seems appropriate ...

Oh God said to Abraham, "Kill me a son."  
Abe says, "Man, you must be puttin' me on."  
God say, "No." Abe say, "What?"  
God say, "You can do what you want Abe, but  
The next time you see me comin' you better run."

Of course, that song is about our next text, but it's merely a symptom of how we forget this one. Abe's a pushover at that point, still grieving the abandonment of his first, still wondering how he was snagged in the wheel of history and wondering when it will crush him. That song's more appropriate to this encounter, where by love-triangle mishap and plans of redemption, Abraham is confronted with a determined wife and a willful God and he can't finagle any solution by which he can be faithful and a good father.

Which means that he's a perfect template for the rest of us.

Because every single one of us has a history that puts us in the damnable position of finding it impossible to be faithful and loving *to someone*, even someone we want to love desperately—sometimes it's our children, sometimes it's our parents, sometimes it's our God, sometimes it's ourselves. Sometimes, this impossibility is wrought by divorce, sometimes by death, sometimes by cruelty, sometimes by selfishness, sometimes by lack of imagination, sometimes by idiocy.

And when our histories and our desires and our weaknesses cripple us, we find that we abandon those people — some literally, some emotionally — just like Abraham abandons Ishmael. And when histories and desires and weakness align against us, we find that we too are abandoned, just like Ishmael is abandoned by Abraham. Consider your life for a moment and you'll know this is true — it's happened in my life; it's happened in your life. The good news in this text, and yes there is some, is that when Ishmael is abandoned, he is abandoned into the care of God. God hears our cries of pain. God provides a well in our wilderness. Even when we exist at cross purposes with God's plan for humanity, as Ishmael did by his simple existence, God never abandons us.

I don't say this in order to make false promises. Let me be clear about what I mean. Our lives will not work out like we want them to. We will get cancer, we will be cheated on, we will be unloved by parents, we will be demolished by bosses, we will be targeted by Sarah, we will be abandoned by Abraham. God will not change that. I'm sorry. When those things happen, we will die from disease, we will divorce, we will recycle our parents' behavior, we will slowly disintegrate at work; we will be turned out; we will grow thirsty in the wilderness. God can intercede in those histories and God quite often intercedes in those histories, have faith, but God quite often does not — not even for his most faithful. I'm sorry. When I say that God never abandons us, I mean that God never leaves because it's gets too painful to stick around. I mean that God is always present.

To a world that grows up with promises of God's blessings, rewards of God's favor, this presence seems a small thing. After all, we'd prefer our mother didn't die, we'd prefer our

husband stayed faithful, we'd prefer God to sow affinity in the hearts of Sarah and Hagar, we'd prefer Ishmael to send his papa a father's day card. But God has chosen a more elusive way, and a way which is ultimately more loving. God has chosen to endure with us in the pain rather than to shelter us like children. That is, God has chosen the way of the servant rather than the way of the tyrant, the way of the cross rather than the way of the king.

God has chosen to provide an attentive ear in the wilderness rather than a forced harmony in the home.

Which leaves us free to be disappointing fathers and acrimonious step-mothers, which leaves us free to abandon and be abandoned.

But *never* by God. God endures with Ishmael, and with Sarah, and with Abraham, and God endures with us too. It's hard to tell people that this is enough, but this is enough.

A final word: I believe God would prefer Abraham's table to overflow with two more cards. Part, maybe most, of the good news of the gospel is that reconciliation can occur. Part, maybe most, of the good news that we are the body of Christ is that we take part in those reconciliations. Buoyed by the presence of God, we find peace, we find healing, we find love, we find reconciliation. Reconciliation doesn't always happen, and it *shouldn't* always happen, but my prayer for us this day is that God be present in our wildernesses, and provide a way of reconciliation to those we've abandoned and to those who've abandoned us.

Amen.

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