

We continue our sermon series on conversations with God.

Two weeks ago, when we looked at Abraham's arguing with God in the context of the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, I said that "this Sunday we face an extremely challenging text." After hearing today's scripture reading, I think you will agree with me when I say "this Sunday we face an even more challenging text!"

The story of Abraham's attempted sacrifice of his first-born son, Isaac, was taught to many of us as children in Sunday school. This story was taught to us, sad to say, as a real command to Abraham by God -- a command which God revokes just in time. What we remembered as children, and what continues to linger in our minds as adults, is not so much the revocation of the command, but the assertion that God asked Abraham to kill his son.

It didn't help that one of the most significant philosophers and theologians of all time, Soren Kierkegaard, wrote a whole book about this topic, "Fear and Trembling." In this book he not only takes this story literally, but goes on to state that it is perfectly natural, so to speak, for God to over-ride ethical demands with God's own religious commands. I remember as a sophomore at college having to read this book and thinking "What in heaven's name is going on here? What kind of religion is this where God can arbitrarily break one of God's own rules, "Thou shalt not kill, or murder," on the whim of subjecting an already faithful servant to what is purported to be the ultimate test of faith? Kierkegaard, in spite of his genius, made the mistake of not reading this story in the context of the time and culture in which it was written. So let us go back in time and culture to get a sense of what lies beneath Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac.

James Michener has written a whole series of powerful and captivating historical novels. He does his research extraordinarily well and his books are acclaimed for the accuracy of their historical and cultural context. One of my favorite Michener novels, "The Source," tells the story of an archaeological dig in present-day Galilee. Michener uses the device of progressively uncovered artifacts to go back in time, devoting a chapter to each artifact discovered.

The third chapter of "The Source" takes us all the way down to level 14 of the archaeological dig. The object unearthed is a small clay figurine of the goddess Astarte, the Canaanite goddess of fertility. It is dated to 2202 before common era. This is within four hundred years of the dating of Abraham -- close enough to accurately describe the practice of child sacrifice which we know to be rampant in that part of the world until approximately 1000 b.c.e. Michener names his town "Makor," and describes the pantheon of gods worshipped at the time, focusing in particular on two: Astarte, the goddess of fertility, and Melak, the god of death.

At this point I would like to quote extensively from "The Source" to set the context for our understanding of today's difficult scripture text. Remember that this was the culture; these were the religious practices that Abraham moved into when he moved from Mesopotamia to Canaan. Describing life in Makor, Michener writes:

..."but there was one special god whom all the citizens of Makor kept close to their hearts, and this was Astarte, the tempting, rich-breasted goddess of fertility. It was she who brought the grain to ripening and the cow to calving, the wife to the birthing stool and chickens to the nest. In an agricultural society, smiling little Astarte was the most immediately significant of the gods, for without her nothing that concerned the cycle of life could come to pass."

The next most important god for the citizens of Makor was the god Melak, the god of war, the god of death. Michener describes how this god had been imported to Makor several centuries earlier from the north. At first Melak demanded only simple sacrifices of grain. Over the years Melak's demands steadily grew greater...small animals had to be killed and burned to keep his protection. The small animals gradually became large animals, and the large animals eventually morphed into sacrificing human beings, specifically children. A shrewd priesthood was able to introduce and cultivate the cult of Melak. They learned soon enough that having to heed the demands of a god of war and death gave them even more power over the people in their town, than the worship of the goddess of fertility.

Michener writes, describing the ability of the priests to rationalize Melak's harsh demands: ..."they were judicious men, and when Makor was last destroyed a surviving priest had explained to the stragglers, 'Disaster came because for the past years you have sacrificed to Melak only the sons of poor families, or boys defective.' They blamed the burning of the town on this slackening of dedication and reasoned, 'If the respectable families of Makor refused Melak their first-born, why should he bother to protect them?' The logic was self-evident, so in the reconstructed town only the sons of leading families were offered to the god..."

This sets the stage for the human drama which Michener now plays out. The main characters are Urbaal, a prosperous farmer and leading citizen of the town, and his second wife, Timna, whose first-born son is now six months old.

Timna tells her husband, "The priest of Melak was here.'

This was what Urbaal had expected. It was bound to come and he wished he knew something that would console his gentle wife, but he had learned that in these matters nothing could be done. 'We'll have other children,' he promised. She started to weep and a clever lie sprang to his mind. 'Timna,' he whispered seductively, 'look at what I've just bought you. A new Astarte.' ...

'I will not surrender my son,' she persisted.

'We all do,' he reasoned gently, and he pulled her to his couch, from which she could see the reassuring Astartes who promised her fertility for years to come. Placing his arm about her he tried to add his personal reassurance, telling her how Matred [his first wife] had found courage to face the same problem. 'At first she nearly perished with grief,' he confided ... 'but later she had four other children, and one night she confessed to me, "We did the right thing." You'll have others playing about your knees, and you'll feel the same way.'

She listened attentively, but in the end whimpered, 'I cannot.'

He was tempted to show his irritation, but she was so gentle that he did not. Instead he reasoned, 'It is to Melak that we look for protection. Great El is necessary, and we cherish him, but in war only Melak is our protector.'

'Why must he be so cruel?' Timna pleaded.

'He does much for us,' Urbaal explained, 'And all he asks in return ... our first-born sons. ...Matred did so. The slave girls did so. And you shall too.'

Several weeks passed. Then the dreaded day came.

"When Urbaal reached home he received the ugly news that Timna had feared. The priests of Melak had returned to deliver their decision: 'The stars indicate that we shall be attacked from the north. By a host larger than before. It is therefore essential to take steps and we shall have a burning of first sons tomorrow.' With a red dye obtained from the seashore they stained the wrists of Urbaal's son and then directed the farmer to halt the screaming of his wife. Proving by their implacable detachment that there could be no appeal from their decision, they stalked from the house and proceeded to seven others, where they similarly stained the wrists of children from the leading families of Maker."

The next day arrived. Michener continues: "When the procession had made several circuits of the town, the drumming ceased, the priests separated, and mothers began to feel the ultimate terror. Finally a knock came on Urbaal's door, and a priest appeared to claim Timna's first-born son. Timna began to scream, but her husband placed his hand over her mouth and the priest nodded his approval, carrying the child from the house. ... 'We must go,' Urbaal said, taking Timna's hand, for if the mothers were not present it might be judged that they offered their sons with a grudging spirit.

But Timna, who was not of Makor, could not bring herself to attend the terrible rites. 'Let me at least stay hidden,' she begged.

Patiently Urbaal took her to the room of the gods and showed her his smiling Astarte. 'Last night,' he assured her, 'Baal-of-the-storm came and made sport with the goddess. I watched them. She's pregnant now, and you shall be too, I promise you.' He dragged her to the door, pulled her hands away as she tried to hold herself to an entrance pillar. Then he lost his patience and slapped her sharply.

‘What are sons for?’ he asked. ‘Stop crying.’”

Michener continues with his description of the painful trek to the town square, then resumes: "Between the palace and the four [upright stones] dedicated to the gentler gods had been erected a platform of movable stones, under which a huge fire already raged. On the platform stood a stone god of unusual construction: it had two extended arms raised so that from the stone fingertips to the body they formed a wide inclined plane; but above the spot where they joined the torso there was a huge gaping mouth, so that whatever was placed upon the arms was free to roll swiftly downward and plunge into the fire. This was the god Melak, the new protector of Makor."

I will stop at this point, sparing you from Michener’s description of the actual sacrifice. I have quoted at length from James Michener’s powerful historical novel, “The Source,” to give us the necessary context in which to I believe, correctly understand today’s reading from scripture.

This was the culture into which Abraham moved. These were the religious practices of his neighbors; all his neighbors in what we call Canaan at that time. Abraham and his family arrived on the scene bringing with them a new god whose nature has barely begun to be revealed. Imagine Abraham’s neighbor’s watching and waiting to see if Abraham is going to be “like them” and sacrifice his first-born son. They’re probably thinking along the lines of “surely Abraham’s new god can’t be much of a protector if he doesn’t command such a sacrifice.” I can see Abraham beginning to think this way himself. Isaac is by now twelve years old. Abraham undoubtedly has been praying over the years to ask God if God really wanted such a thing. Apparently no clear response. So I imagine Abraham eventually coming to the conclusion that since God had not clearly said no, perhaps God is implicitly saying yes which brings us face to face with our text for today.

Let us try to put ourselves in Abraham’s place. Imagine that you are living in the land of Canaan in 1800 b.c.e. As we have seen, it is a time when human sacrifice, especially of one’s first-born son, was not only common, but expected and respected. It was one of the most defining characteristics of the culture in which you lived. To be sure, you are worshipping a “new” god, a god who seems to be significantly different than the local gods. But this new god has remained stubbornly silent on the issue of child sacrifice. You want more than anything else to stay in the favor of this god who has called you into a special relationship. Since God has not given you a definitive “no” concerning the sacrifice of one’s first-born son, and all your neighbors are doing it to remain in favor with their gods, you begin to wonder if your new god might not be pleased if you were to offer up Isaac as a sign of your devotion.

So after a while your mind convinces you that God’s silence has been a test, that God has been testing the extent of your devotion, the extent of your obedience. Convinced now that God is speaking to you in your thoughts, you “hear” God say to you, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and

offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.” You cannot presume to second-guess God; you simply obey.

You get up early the next morning, thankful that Sarah is such a sound sleeper, make the necessary preparations, and set out. Somehow you survive the three horrible days -- days filled with silence and sorrow -- that it takes to get there. On the third day Isaac begins to catch on, and asks his impossible question, “Father! ...the fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering”...to which you give your evasive answer, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” Upon arriving, you do what has to be done: you throw together a rough altar, cast the wood on it, bind your son, and place him on top of the wood. You grasp your knife to kill, but in the eternity between the upswing and down stroke a startling insight slams into your consciousness. It is an insight which breaks in from the “outside,” a thought which completely transcends your own limitations of time and place. You realize that this is not what God wants you to do at all. You see that this whole experience has been a test, a test of your faith and obedience not to sacrifice your son.

According to this interpretation, Abraham, in the eternity between upswing and down stroke, receives a revelatory insight into God’s nature. He sees -- he is probably the first person on this planet to clearly see -- that God is a god of life, a god who is not into violence. Admittedly, this way of looking at the story is a minority interpretation, and a hugely minority one at that. Not even most mainstream ministers and theologians would go so far. But if we choose to look at the story this way, we stand in the good company of Jewish novelist, theologian, and novel prize winner, Elie Wiesel, and a few others.

Two weeks ago we talked about three crucial principles of biblical interpretation: accommodation, consistency, and development. For our purposes today, we will briefly look at accommodation and consistency. Accommodation means that God condescends to meet people where they're at in terms of their own historical time and place. So God condescends to meet Abraham in the barbaric ritual of child sacrifice and God subverts this ritual from within. Like a master kung fu artist, God flips the meaning of this practice of its head -- the test becomes not one of being willing to sacrifice one's first-born; the test becomes one of not being willing. The principle of consistency maintains that God’s nature does not change -- God always has been and always will be compassionate, nonviolent, and loving. God’s nature does not change -- our understanding of God’s nature is what changes!

This way of looking at the story of Abraham and Isaac, I believe, does much more justice to God’s true nature than the traditional way of looking at it. To sum up: Abraham was stuck, seriously stuck. God’s spirit intervened in his life, and set him straight about God being a god of life, not death, set him straight about God not being a god of violence.

Because of Abraham’s encounter with God’s spirit nearly 4000 years ago, we can sing “O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come” -- and mean it.

We can sing, with Julie, “You are all I need” -- and mean it.

We can ask God to be our vision -- and mean it.

Because of Abraham’s encounter with God’s spirit nearly 4000 years ago, we can proclaim in song “He’s got the whole world in his hands” -- and mean it.

Amen.

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