

Sermon: Happy Dependence Day!  
4 Pentecost, Year A  
Genesis 22:1-14

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Happy almost 4<sup>th</sup> of July! This week we celebrate Independence Day in America. Two hundred forty-one years ago a group of American colonists declared that they were sick and tired of being pushed around by the British crown and declared our group of colonies an independent nation. That independence didn't arrive easily or without demanding great sacrifice on the parts of all involved.

It's interesting that this week's first reading from Genesis has such a different take on the notion of independence. This passage, often referred to as the "Binding of Isaac," is one of the best known and most troubling in Judeo-Christian tradition. Our friend Rabbi Joe said this passage is probably *the* most studied and discussed passage in all of Hebrew Scripture.

It presents challenges on a number of fronts and invites a LOT of questions. Did God really command Abraham to take Isaac, the son he had been promised in his old age and offer him as a burnt offering? Was he telling Abraham to kill him? And why did Abraham not protest? I mean wasn't this the same Abraham who just a few chapters back had protested wholeheartedly to God when God threatened to eliminate the people of Sodom and Gomorrah for their sinful ways? Why so quiet here when Abraham's son's life is at stake? And what about Isaac himself, wouldn't this be seen as abusive for him to be bound by his father and laid upon the altar to be sacrificed? This seems absurd, senseless. I am sure each of you have even more questions as we read this text.

We need to think of the placement of this story in order to understand better where we are in the relationship between God and Abraham. Although Abraham is mentioned elsewhere in Scripture, this is the final bookend to the Abrahamic story cycle. He is no longer the same man he was when God first approached him in chapter 12 and said, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great so that you will be a blessing. So Abraham went, as the Lord had told him." (Ch. 12:1-4)

So by now Abraham had walked with God for a long time. There had been ups and downs. There had been times when Abraham was faithful and times when he really missed the mark. God promised him at the "get-go" that he would make him a great nation, and even when it sure didn't look as though God would deliver on his promise that a child would be born, God came through. So by now many years had gone by and Abraham's faith had developed, grown and deepened. And God said again, "Go to the place I will show you." "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah." And Abraham went.

Maybe Abraham was able to obey this strange command to sacrifice his son because he so trusted God and had his best interest at heart. Notice in the text when Abraham told the young men who had traveled with Isaac and himself that "*we* will go over there, worship and *we* will come back to you." He spoke and acted as if he *and* Isaac would be returning. Maybe Abraham anticipated that God would provide a way. He walked right into the bleakest of situations with

the full trust in God's promise – that his only son, by whom his progeny will come forth, would live. God would find a way through the dark moment. As he reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son, God stopped him. And he then saw what God saw, a ram in the thicket that will be used for the sacrifice. He had come to rely on God because he knew that God was to be trusted, even in this dark moment, this moment when all might have seemed lost. He placed his trust in *God's* seeing rather than his own.

Abraham's story was intended to also be Israel's story. The people of Israel, God's chosen people, God's first born, were to see in it a God who would see them through the dark times, times of exile, times when God didn't seem so present but was. They were to be encouraged in their deepening faith. And Abraham's story becomes our story as well, as people of faith.

We find over time that life holds light and darkness, delight and angst, things we can easily praise God for and things that cause such deep sorrow there are no words that can express it. Theologian Richard Rohr writes, "I call the dark side of life the left hand of God or the painful mystery of things. That's often how it happens. You're going along and things are just fine, then *wham bam*—you're struck by the left hand of God. The longer you live the more you see the terrible pain, injustice, and absurdity as part of the entire world and the lives of those around you. You can't make any logical or pleasing sense out of it. Then, if you are open, you're driven back to an inner place of grace where the paradox is simply held by Love. The only alternative is a life of cynicism. (Richard Rohr, 6/27/17)

Could this story of the Binding of Isaac be a paradox where Abraham's hand is held back from killing Isaac by the God who is love? We can head straight into the darkest of situations because we have seen God at work before, we can trust in God's presence even when we can't feel it, even when we can't see it in the moment. Abraham's God was demanding and sometimes strange and often mysterious, requiring faith. The faith of Abraham was not a one-time static faith either. His faith was on-going. He was reminded with each new turn of the road of a deepening dependence on God. Somehow he knew, perhaps because of the years of walking with God, he knew God would provide.

How is God inviting you to step out in faith today? To trust in his provision? Can you trust God in the darkest or most painful areas of your life right now? Perhaps in something that seems even absurd or senseless? Can you walk with God trusting the future? The faith journey will not be a picnic; in fact, to walk with God is demanding. The rigor of faith's demands will ebb and flow but God's faithfulness will be rich and sure.

Abraham trusted God and his deep faith that had developed over years allowed him to see dependence on God as a good and reliable thing. As we celebrate our Independence as a nation this week, may we also celebrate our Dependence on a God who will see us, personally as individuals but also us as a nation, through our dark times. The God of love will not leave us orphans to face our perils alone but will help us find a way into the future. May faith abound. Amen.