

Sacrifice and Trauma

Preached by The Rev. Mary Keenan, June 28, 2020

The story of the almost-sacrifice of Isaac has lots of interpretations. It is one of the most compelling and shocking stories in the Bible, controversial even. This test that God gives Abraham, asking him to sacrifice his beloved son, is often used to teach us about Abraham's faithfulness to God and God's promise to Abraham. Or to launch into a comparison of God's sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

But there is no getting around the discomfort of the story as it is. In the middle of this story, between God and Abraham, is Isaac. At some point, we have to imagine what it's like to be Isaac on this walk up the mountain and at the altar. Perhaps we know that point of view uncomfortably well.

What does it feel like to be in the middle of someone else's "test"? To be the one sacrificed? For that matter, what does it feel like to be Sarah, left out of the story but living with its consequences? Perhaps some of us know that feeling, too.

This story about faithfulness is also about trauma. Trauma is our physical, emotional, spiritual response to a distressing, threatening event. It is a response to physical, emotional, and spiritual violence. Whatever else this story is about, it records a traumatic experience that will be with Isaac - and Abraham and Sarah - for the rest of their lives. It will live in their minds, their bones, probably their prayers.

And Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac are the ancestors of an intergenerational community, a nation - and nations can experience trauma, too. In fact, the history of the People of God - from Genesis through Revelation - is one of repeated communal trauma.

- Slavery and the escape from slavery
- Oppression of the poor and exile for that injustice
- The House of David is rife with all kinds of trauma - including between family members
- Jesus' life began with trauma - his own escape to Egypt and the slaughter of the innocents
- The birth of our faith tradition is traumatic: Roman occupation, Jesus' crucifixion, the persecution of early Christians

Part of the human experience is to experience personal trauma - loss, fear, pain... And nearly everyone also experiences national or communal trauma, that is, what the COVID-19 pandemic is for us now. Our shared history of racism is a national trauma. So

are surviving a hurricane or wild fire. These are all experiences of personal and shared distress and threat.

What this story presents is a deep wounded cry found throughout scripture and our theological heritage: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Godforsakenness. The Psalmist, Job, Jesus - all experienced this feeling of being abandoned by God. It is hard to imagine that Isaac, Abraham and Sarah didn't feel it too.

What is the hope in this situation? What is it that God wants for us as we experience and recover from trauma?

We are all in a moment of prolonged trauma. And one thing this story give us is a safe space to reflect on the unfairness, the suffering, the tragedy of it all. We may - indeed we must - feel free to lift those cries to God.

Here we have a story that allows us to ask -

Why to the innocent suffer?

Why do we find ourselves in tragic situations we did not cause?

When we mourn our losses and pain and oppression with God, we also acknowledge that God does not want suffering for any of God's children. The fact that we mourn points to our faith in a God who loves us. No matter where you stand in this story, God does provide. God brings life into this story of pending death. In the end, there is a ram in the thicket. God's promise to Abraham is upheld.

As we stand together in this story, perhaps acknowledging the ways we feel tested or bound to someone else's test, I want to identify signs of hope and resilience.

- First: God knows our trauma, we don't need to hide it or be ashamed of it. God remembers and holds our loss, abuse, and pain. God, in fact, stands with us in all our trauma. We are not alone. Like the Psalmist and Job and so many of our faithful forebears, we can take our grief and our questions to God.
- Second: Our faith tradition tells and retells stories of trauma that would be easier to forget. Our shared story of faith includes horrendous acts of sexual and family violence, almost intolerable suffering, and betrayal. Truth is an antidote to trauma. Telling these hard stories acknowledges the experiences of those who suffer and makes them our shared story.

Our story is not separate from the very difficult experiences of people at all times and

in all places. In fact, the risen Christ still had scars from his trauma. Those scars were inseparable from who and what he was. Our scars can be the same.

- Third: The causes of trauma are not okay. In the story of the binding of Isaac, God interrupts the action. The sacrifice of a child is not required, now or ever. If you have experienced or are experiencing trauma, it is not because God wants this for you. Trauma does not make you unworthy of love or hope.
- And Fourth: Trauma is not destiny. Although the hard experiences of Abraham's heirs - including our own experiences - seem baked into the human condition, so is resilience.
The same family that sent a son up the mountain unsure of the outcome, did end up being the vehicle by which all nations are blessed. By which we are blessed.

Perhaps the time is right to hold our own traumatic story within the larger story of all God's people. To remember that all of them have suffered for all kinds of reasons - fair and unfair, expected and unexpected, tolerable and intolerable. And in the midst of it all, through our tears and our fears, we are children of a God who suffers with us and, in the end, provides for us.

AMEN