

Genesis 22: 1 - 15

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 8A

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“What we need are books that hit us like the most painful misfortune, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, that make us feel as though we had been banished to the woods, far from any human presence ...” so said Franz Kafka in defense of reading. He continued, “a book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us.” He probably wasn’t talking about the Bible, but he could have been. Stories of painful misfortune, that make us feel like we have been banished, far from human presence; it’s what large swaths of scripture feel like.

I stumbled upon this Kafka quote, not my usual fare, in an article about reading and book bans; an article which includes the information that in Utah, parents have filed a petition to remove the Bible from classroom shelves because it contains “indecent material.” As it turns out, this petition to remove the Bible was filed with ironic intent, as satire even, to point out the ridiculous and arbitrary nature of book bans. But also, they’re not wrong. The Bible is full of violence, misogyny, nativist and ethnic prejudice, questionable sexual ethics, and more. And today scripture presents us with one of the most troubling stories of all. Even Ellen Davis, LPS preacher and Hebrew Scripture scholar-extraordinaire, admits to imagining making the case for removing this story of God, Abraham, and Isaac, or at least burying it back in some more obscure book in the dense middle where we’re less likely to stumble upon it.

But here we are in the very first book, with the family that is becoming the foundation of God’s promise and covenant. This family, you’ll recall, has already been through quite a bit: relocation, barrenness, in-fighting, jealousy, betrayals. And just when we might think their story is settling down into a more peaceful pattern, God shows up with a terrible request. “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 I will show you.” To point out in a side note that this is the first use of the word “love” in the whole of the Bible isn’t a fun fact, it’s a further turn of the knife.

Need is a strong word. Do we really need books that hit us like the most painful misfortune? Stories about the death of someone we loved more than ourselves? Do we really need to visit and revisit the feeling of banishment and abandonment? And for people for whom faith can already be a complex and difficult task, do we really need stories in which God is the apparent source of this anguish?

Ellen Davis ultimately concedes that we do need this story despite our qualms, and she says that we need it because it reveals something not about our anguish but about God’s anguish. God being anguished is not a familiar description, yet among the manifold attributes of God is the strange idea that God is vulnerable. God is vulnerable precisely because God is in relationship with the likes of us. The move to understanding God as vulnerable starts with a loosening our tight grip on the concept of God’s omniscience. God, some medieval rabbis claimed, “can only know the things that can be known,” and they further suggest the hearts and minds, the wills of scrappy men and women cannot be known with certainty in advance. So, God does not actually know everything about Abraham, yet God needs to know about the depth of his faith because Abraham is the one selected to be the carrier of God’s dream into the world following so much turmoil from gardens and floods in the early scenes of this very book.

God does not know until the awful, unbearable steps up the mountain are taken, the knife lifted. And only then, God says, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God.” God learns something new that could not be known before.

And we learn something new about God too, here early in the biblical story, and it’s not an easy lesson. We learn in this story Ellen Davis says, “not everything about God, but something essential,” that there is a divine vulnerability in God’s willingness to be in relationship with us. This vulnerability may be a new idea to you or me; it certainly would have been to Abraham. Though it’s worth pointing out that this same vulnerability that shapes a relationship of mutuality and love can also still be unsettling and even unwanted.

I’ll tell you plainly that it unsettles me. If an anguished and vulnerable God is in the business of testing people, I’m unsure I want to keep reading, much less be in relationship. If you come to me and tell me about the trials of your life and wonder if God is testing you, I will gently push back on that narrative. In my own life, when I’ve been looking up from the depths of the pit, I steadfastly repeated to myself and anyone who would listen that while I believed God was with me down there, I was sure God did not put me there. So, I’ll tell you, I’m preaching a sermon in search of my own understanding. Which it seems, is actually the whole point. Whether I like the idea or not, I’ve been trying to walk around with the idea, trying to walk around inside the idea, trying to walk up toward the mountain with God, Abraham, and Isaac.

What do you and I do with stories that are provocative and challenging? We could close the book and quit reading. We could reject the plot lines that disturb us and the imagery that shakes us. We could ask that they be taken from the shelves. We could turn to stories that affirm our ideas and reject those tales that horrify us. We might feel all the more justified in this response when these stories are about our God. Earlier this summer, preaching at Suzanne Henley’s memorial, Scott offered this query: “We ... demand things from our scriptures that we don’t require of our art, or even of our friends. We don’t expect the characters in our novels to be well-behaved and morally uncomplicated. But we get squeamish about depictions of God as raging and angry, even vengeful ... Why do we wish the God of the Bible to be so [uncomplicated, not at all complex]?” And to his list, I would add some squeamishness about God as vulnerable, and some resistance to the idea of God as inclined to test.

“What we need are books that hit us like the most painful misfortune, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, that make us feel as though we had been banished to the woods, far from any human presence ...” We need these stories, as it turns out, much the same way God needed to know the heart of Abraham. We can only know what can be known, and we can’t understand every possible and potential experience in the multiverse. So, we turn to each other and bear witness to stories that are different from our own. We turn to books that reveal struggles and triumphs that are outside of our imagining. We keep reading the Bible to witness encounters that hit us hard, remind us we don’t know everything, and also tell us again and again that even when we feel banished, far from human presence, we are never alone.

We need all this, not to swallow it and agree, but to chew on it and ponder. Is this how God shows up in my life? Is this story of wonder and new life familiar to me? Is this tale of desperation and relief like my life? Are these the choices that I would make with the options presented to me? What might I be asked to bear, and how will I bear it? To be a human in the world is to be short-sighted and limited, but when we band together and witness each other’s stories, painful and beautiful, past and present, familiar and foreign, we take up an ax not for each other, but for the frozen sea within us.

References: Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament by Ellen Davis and “Everyone Likes Reading. Why Are We So Afraid of It: Book bans, chatbots, pedagogical warfare: What it means to read has become a minefield.” by A.O. Scott in the New York Times.