

Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Sarah C. Stewart

Gospel Reading: Genesis 22:1-14

June 28, 2020



*Holy One, may we exercise the gift of choice
and discover change as the only true path to liberation.*

Amen.

You can learn a lot about what people love by listening to them sing. My guess is, it's been a while since we've been with another human, live and in the flesh, lifting voices up in song.

On a recent hike, I crossed paths with someone blaring country music on a mobile device, as he summited the mountain. Eavesdropping on that dusty hilltop I remembered the old, familiar joke: *what do you get when you play a country song backwards?*

You get your truck back, your dog back, and your baby back.

Clearly the guy preferred classic country, because the song made no mention of that by-now-near-universal wish to recover some of what we've lost in this ironic year. You learn a lot about what people love by listening to them lament. And if country so skillfully voices lament, maybe country is the genre for 2020, helping us name the heart-breaking truth all around us.

Even if you've been off the grid a while, it doesn't take long to decipher the hurt swirling in our world, whether you start with droning helicopters, COVID-19 numbers, or controversial hashtags.

If we are what we love, as some argue, we may not love what we think do. Sing about your loves and you'll sing about your hurts, no matter the names you conjure.

Today's reading from Genesis recounts a spell-binding story. The Hebrew word for binding, *akedah*, is a fitting title by which this narrative has come to be known in our Judeo-Christian tradition. Isaac is the boy who was bound for death but lived to tell about it.

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Quite like an ancient ballad played backwards — elderly father proves himself faithful, no matter how much it hurts, and wins his boy back in the end. But did Adonai *really* ask Abraham to sacrifice the son he had waited his whole life to welcome? (Good thing this wasn't the reading for Father's Day!)

The interpretive tradition offers many fascinating takes on this text. Rabbis through the centuries reckon Abraham righteous, more or less. Plenty has been made of the many silences in this story. You learn a lot about people listening for what they *don't* sing.

One such note-worthy layer we discover, when we listen between the lines of the Akedah, involves how Abraham's relationship with God—never mind his connection with his son—gets forever altered by this test of faith: the moment the man surrenders what he holds most dear to God.

You could say the whole story begins with surrender, from that very first moment God calls Abraham and Sarah to leave their homeland and the stability of community to take a road-trip to somewhere they'd never seen.

When fear makes tarrying with God tricky, the duo veer toward crafty self-reliance. We heard about one such episode in last week's lectionary. Turns out the achy-breaky human heart struggles with surrender. It's complicated, as they say. I know it's a struggle for me. We cling to whatever holds the sweet spot in our hearts. Albeit quietly, we sometimes cherish these things even more than God.

It's tempting to read the Akedah with the ending in mind:

The angel does stop Abraham before the deed is done. The lamb-ram turns up, just in time. Everyone gets reconciled with God. As that mountain breeze miracle unfolds, granting Isaac a new lease on life, we exhale with relief. We, too, are saved. Though not in ways we might imagine. After that mountain top, we can never be the same.

Our heart-songs also better be a'changin'. For we dare not mock God's provision by slinking back to what's familiar, a blessed life for ourselves and our kin, as if nothing ever was at stake. Real relationship with God pushes us to even greater faithfulness, to peer below the surface, at things we'd mostly rather not interrogate.

The gut-wrenchingly complicated Akedah ebbs like a moving threnody, haunting our deepest hopes, radically reorienting our loves... *if* we allow our heartstrings to be touched by its lament.

Transformation is the price of life with God. Like Abraham and Sarah, who kissed safety goodbye, we can never go back to the ways we thought things were. It's no wonder this story stirs up fear and trembling. True transformation means our tune and lyrics get upended so we can honor this calling to sing no longer for ourselves.

Whatever in our lives needs dethroning, whatever grief and pain weigh down our hearts, whatever cripples the God-given promise of our lives, *these* are what God wants on that altar, bound and burned, so that we might be healed and freed.

What we each are being asked to sacrifice, I really cannot say.

Maybe there is a relationship we believe we cannot live without.

Like Abraham and Sarah, it could be a long-desired pregnancy.

Maybe it's tangled up with a career. Or the love of a lifestyle our paycheck affords.

For some, it could hinge on a standing resentment. For others, a substance or habit that holds us hostage.

Whatever it is we cling to, whatever captivates or compels us, the Maker of the Universe comes to transform and to free, from the most powerful one in the land to the one counted last and least. This gospel of love haunts us until we surrender.

Like an uninvited specter, irony lingers over us this year. 2020 vision is blurry, at best. Hindsight, always *has* been riddled with blind spots because we humans struggle to square our histories.

Turns out you learn a lot about us all, whether we've earned the victim or the villain spot in the song we're each singing. Even the most righteous cannot stand, for the human heart gets wooed by loves and loyalties that let us down, causing us to stumble short of the glory of God's great love.

Whatever our chosen loves—whether folks would commend or condemn us for them — every swipe we take, every move we do (or don't) make, sixteen ways to Sunday, brokenness besets us all. Isaac isn't the only one who needs saving by the time divine love's illuminating flash comes on the scene.

Still, God comes to liberate.

Tending our loves and laments is how we risk transformation with God. Even if we never hear a voice from heaven.

That still small voice inside us knows how often our hearts are steered—unconsciously at times, though sometimes *with* our consent—toward things that diminish. Loves we might think twice about cherishing, if we saw their power to form our habits and character, and future, over time.

Listening to *that* inner voice might seem easier than summiting a mountain, but it's no less risky than stowing away in a patriarch's saddle bag, to catch a glimpse of what we must surrender if we are truly to be free.

But every time we listen that earnestly...

every time we dare to give those things to God...

we follow in the footsteps of our forebears, who scarcely imagined how faith would change them.

But they *did* live to tell about it.

The journey is about progress, not perfection. So, don't be dissuaded by worry or confusion.

It's ok to tremble with fear. God is here, with us, every time that invitation to surrender comes.

For God comes not to steal our hopes or our futures, but to free us for greater promise. With God there is no free-ish. Only we have choice about embracing this kind of transformation.

In a world that prefers self-love and self-protection to anything resembling self-sacrifice, God asks us to be changed by a death-defeating love. A love that unites us with the One who made us and who died to set us free.

When *that* connection is the center of our lives, toppling every other love supreme, then and only then do we find our place in God's redeeming dream for creation.

In that liberating love song God gives us back more than we ever could imagine, turning our lament to joy. It's the sort of rousing ballad every voice, especially in this fateful year, might yet rise up and choose to sing.

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