

June 26, 2005
Genesis 22:1-14
First Parish, Brunswick
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Discerning God's Voice

Remember the Bill Cosby routine about Noah. As I remember it went something like this:

“Noah?”
“Yes?”
“Noah, I want you to build an ark.”
“Who is this?”
“It’s the Lord, Noah.”
“Right!”
“Noah, I want you to build an ark. Make it 30 cubits by 50 cubits by 300 cubits.”
“Right! Who is this, really?”

That’s a crucial question – Who is this really? Sometimes it is hard for us to identify with the biblical stories because they often depict communication with God as if it was as simple as getting a phone call.

Bill Cosby, with his wonderful sense of humor and irony, reminds us that this is not what most of us experience. It’s not easy to know who is really speaking to us. Is it God? Is it our own ego, our family traditions, our church? Is it our culture or other religious sentiments?

Often it is not easy to discern God’s voice. The fact is we are usually cautious when people are absolutely sure that they know exactly what God wants. We know how easy it is for human desires to become shrouded in religious ideologies. Too many of the world’s horrors have been committed in the name of God.

So what if your neighbor Abraham, or your husband Abraham, stopped by to pick up a sharp knife on his way to the land of Moriah with Isaac?

As you may remember, we’ve been following the stories of Abraham and Sarah these past few weeks. First, we heard God’s call to Abraham and Sarah to journey to a new land. Then, we heard God’s promise that even though it appeared to be hopeless, they would indeed have a son. Last week, we saw their attempt to fulfill that promise on their own through Sarah’s maidservant Hagar and the son, Ishmael that Hagar bore to Abraham. As you may remember, it is through Ishmael that the Muslim community traces itself back to Father Abraham.

Now Abraham and Sarah are at home with their son Isaac, the heir to the promise, the hope for the future. Then, one day, Abraham sets off with Isaac to the land of Moriah. We read of his intentions but we can’t believe it. Abraham believes he is supposed to sacrifice Isaac as a burnt offering. To our modern sensibilities it is beyond comprehension. It is a text of terror.

Traditionally this story has been interpreted as a test of Abraham’s trust in God. In some ways the story does function that way in its present context. However, that’s not the focus I want to take today. Instead, I want to suggest

that, as some scholars believe, this story originally served another very significant purpose - purpose which has to do with exactly what the story suggests – human sacrifice.

As you probably know, in many ancient religions, human sacrifice was a common practice. And this practice was not unknown among the people of Israel and Judah. In 1 Kings (16: 34), during the reign of Ahab and Jezebel, who were not good rulers and were known to be unfaithful to true worship, there is an account of the bodies of two children being buried under the foundations of Jericho to bring good luck to the building project.

In the biblical tradition, Abraham and Sarah not only represent two people they are symbolic of the early Israelite community. They are the foundation of a new faith, a new religion, a new understanding of the holy. One of the questions the Israelite people had to struggle with was the question - Is this God of Abraham going to be like all the other gods and demand human sacrifice?

One way to look at today's story is as a story that represents Abraham's (and the early Israelite community's) struggle with the practice of child sacrifice. The good news in this story is that Abraham learns that the Lord does not want human sacrifice.

One of the clues to looking at the story in this way has to do with the names of God that are used. It is something that we wouldn't notice in English. It caught my attention when I was reading again the conversation on this story that was part of Bill Moyers PBS series on Genesis about 10 years ago. One of the

scholars, Dianne Bergant, commented, "The text points to two gods. For the first part of the story, the word used is *Elohim*. As soon as there is the intervention, the divine name is used." (Pg. 225)

Although various names are used for God in the Hebrew Scriptures and in some ways they are used interchangeable, there is also significant difference in the names.

The God who speaks at the beginning of the story is Elohim. El is the common Semitic name for god. You might say it is the generic name for God. Elohim is interestingly enough a plural word. Literally it means "the gods", but it came to mean also the royal WE, the Deity. It is this Elohim who is said to command Abraham to take Isaac to the mountain and offer him as a burnt offering.

Later in the story, when the intervention takes place, there is a different name for God. At this point we find the "brand" name for God, the name that is unique to the Jewish people. Most of us have heard it as Jehovah. However, most scholars today speak of the name as Yahweh. In our English translations it is translated "the Lord." This name was so special the Jewish people didn't even say it out loud. So when Abraham and Isaac are at their most vulnerable and Abraham has lifted the knife against Isaac, an angel of the **Lord** says "NO!"

Names were very important and carried great significance for the Hebrew people. So although we don't even notice this shift in names, it is likely that this would have been a clue to the earliest hearers of this story that the story represents a shift in our

understanding of who God is and what is it that God requires of us. The God of the Hebrews, the Lord, does not require this kind of sacrifice.

For us today it is so obvious that God doesn't want human sacrifice that it's hard to comprehend that people ever believed such a thing. This makes me wonder, when people a thousand years from now look back on us, what will they find incomprehensible in terms of our religious practices? About what things will they say, "How could they have ever thought God wanted that?"

We are always living in the midst of shifting religious understandings. One of the significant shifts in religious practice during my lifetime involves me very personally and that is women clergy. Since I've been doing this for over twenty years I am now surprised that people are surprised when they meet me.

A few years ago when I was visiting a parishioner at a facility, I asked the young woman at the front desk to see this person and identified myself as her pastor. The young woman's eyes grew big and she asked, "Can you do that?" I smiled and told her that in my tradition it is possible. Then I asked her, "By chance are you Catholic?" Her eyes grew bigger as she replied, "How did you know?" I was reminded of how much our context shapes what we believe is possible and appropriate.

Just this last week, our custodian, Rob came back to the office after giving an impromptu tour to a couple who knocked on the sanctuary door. He commented that when he mentioned to them that we have two pastors – a man

and a woman – they were very surprised to learn that there was a woman pastor here. It didn't seem appropriate to them. I commented to Rob that I'm surprised when people are surprised. To his credit, Rob told me that I am the first woman minister that he has met.

Many more people will be meeting women ministers in the years ahead. The student population in mainline Protestant seminaries today is generally at least 50% women.

About what other religious practices and customs do you think God is speaking a new word? How will we discern God's voice?

We will

- Engage the stories of scripture
- Test out our perceptions with others, especially those we know will disagree with us. (Notice Abraham didn't ask Sarah.)
- Question – Who is this really?
- Pray
- Worship
- Service in the community
- Listen

And, we will trust that, in the end, the angel of the Lord will speak with a word of truth and grace and liberation.