

My first thought when looking on Monday morning at the Old Testament lesson set for today when Abraham is called to sacrifice his son Isaac was thank goodness it came up this week and not last week when we had a baptism at this service. That really would've freaked out the family, I think. In other years I would've gently passed over that story about Abraham and Isaac and find something to say about the gospel. But if you've been here in previous weeks, you'll know that at the moment, I'm preaching a whole series on the life of Abraham, so I could hardly leave this story out.

So today I've got to stay and wrestle with this very troubling story. It's been labeled one of the Bible's texts of terror, and it deserves, I think, that moniker. Richard Dawkins, the famous British atheist, calls this story a disgraceful story of child abuse, and I can see his point. There's lots of troubling things about this story. I won't go into the troubling elements because they're blindingly obvious. Nothing more needs to be said about them, but I do want to stay with the text and the story to try and make sense of it, especially how it fits with the rest of the biblical story. It's a text we are forced, I think, to wrestle with, and it's, I think, it's a gloves off, no holds barred, time to explore what it means to trust God and what it means to say that God will provide.

It's a story that has much to teach us, even though the circumstances are excruciating, and I want to acknowledge the help I've received in preparation this week by an English bishop called Jo Bailey Wells, who was until recently, my mother's bishop back in England. She helped me to get to grips with this passage because I found the normal commentaries that I go to at the start of the week to get some thought and inspiration were all totally useless, because each one of them in their own way try to rationalize this passage, and it's beyond rationalization.

It's a bit like the way that people deal with suffering. We can't explain that either. Suffering can't be explained away. I read an article in the New York Times a few years ago about a woman called Kate. She was 35 and she was unexpectedly diagnosed with stage four colon cancer. And her first reaction was, but I've got a three-year-old son. She wrote about the counsel she received from all the well-meaning people that she subsequently spoke to, and she divides these people into three kinds. Everyone who spoke to her was basically one of these three times, a minimizer, a teacher, or a solver.

The minimizers tried to insist that it wasn't that bad after all. Kate's sister was on a plane and told her, and they were talking, and she told her about the diagnosis. The person sitting next to her and the neighbor explained how Kate's cancer was much more preferable to life under the Iranian revolution, as if they were competing in some sort of calamity Olympics.

Then, there are the teachers. They focus on how the experience of suffering is meant to be part of an education, and one even wished Kate for it to be for her, a sort of Job experience, something she could learn from, as if she needed any further suffering than she already had. And finally, there are the solvers who can't hide their disappointment that Kate wasn't really healing herself. As Kate put it, there's always a nutritional supplement, a Bible verse, or a mental process that I have not adequately tried.

The minimizers, the teachers, and the solvers all want to get going on this story of Abraham and Isaac. All the commentaries that I felt were so unsatisfactory fit into one of those three categories, but it doesn't work. The horrors of the story remain. It simply can't be explained away. And so, we are forced to dig beneath the layers of horror for clues of what's really at the heart of this story. And what we can see if we do that is that the story has a clear structure. It hangs on Abraham's use of the word or the phrase, "Here I am," which comes three times at the beginning, the middle, and the end of the story. And these are the same words that Isaiah uses when the angel comes to him and calls him. It's the same word, phrase that Mary utters when the angel Gabriel appears to her at the annunciation.

There are sorts of no holds barred, all defenses down, gloves off response of empty-handed trust, and there's a pattern to the three here I am moments, each has the same shape. At the start, God calls Abraham and Abraham responds, "Here I am." God says, "Take." At the end, the angel calls Abraham and Abraham responds again, "Here I am." And the angel relaxes the command and says, "Do not lay your hand." In between, in the middle, Isaac calls out as they reach the top of Mount Moriah, father Isaac says, and Abraham responds in the exact same words, "Here I am." And Isaac asks, "Where's the lamb?" But this time at the center of the story, Abraham breaks the pattern of the other two into changes and answers the question by saying, "God will provide." God will provide. That's the heart of the story.

But at the point where they're uttered in this story of Abraham and Isaac, they seem to flatly contradict all the evidence. Is this a statement of duplicity and cowardice, a refusal to tell Isaac the truth until the very last moment, or are they the words of the greatest faith? Even seconds before the terrible sacrifice, Abraham still believed that God would find an alternative. We don't know, because the story is so sparsely told. It doesn't tell us.

So rather than focus on what it doesn't say, what can we say in the story? Well, what we can say is that this story sets in motion two strands that we see end up being very important later on in the biblical narrative. The first strand is that of the lamb. The lamb represents God's mercy. Do you remember in the next book of the Bible, there's a great story of the Exodus when the plagues are coming and the people of Israel told to kill a lamb, put the blood of that lamb on the lintel of the door, so the angel of death passes over them and they're shown mercy in that dreadful place.

The second strand is out of the son. Isaac, as we've seen in previous weeks, was the bearer of God's blessing. Through him, God was to bless Abraham as the father of many nations. In this story of Abraham and Isaac, God's mercy in the form of a lamb intervened to preserve God's blessing in the form of a son. And these two strands come together later in the New Testament in the story of Jesus, a story which retains the same shape but has a different outcome.

Again, the story of Jesus in the end of his life is set over three days. Again, we have a son carrying wood of sacrifice to a hill of execution. Again, we have a son humbly proceeding in the face of horror while only partly comprehending what the father has in mind. But this time, the lamb of mercy and the son of blessing converge into one, the words God will provide take on a new resonance here. The story of Jesus' passion, passion repeats and develops the story of Abraham and Isaac. In the garden of Gethsemane, the night before Jesus was crucified, we recognize a similar struggle, "Not my will, but yours," Jesus says to his father. In other words, I'll follow your lead. "Here I am," said Jesus, who was God in flesh, God incarnate.

We discover a great truth about the crucifixion by looking at that story through the lens of the story of Abraham and Isaac. What we see there is something that no one knew about God. That at the moment of truth, God's sovereignty, dignity, majesty, and power

will be suspended and God's life will be placed entirely in human hands. If Mount Moriah is where God tested humanity, Mount Calvary is where humanity tested God. And on Mount Calvary, we see God's true colors. God's character is most fully revealed. God provided. God provided what was needed to win us that gift of eternal life. And what did he provide? A lamb? Yes, and also a son. That's why we call Jesus the Son, the lamb of God.

In the end, God provided of himself. We are to understand the cross as God's self-sacrifice. God was offering of himself what was needed to win us back to him. In Abraham, humanity says to God, "There is nothing more important than you. Here I am, I will give up my whole world to be with you." In Jesus, God is saying to humanity, "There is nothing more important than you. Here I am. I will give up everything to be with you."

For all her scathing remarks about those who can't see her condition truthfully, Kate, in the article that I mentioned earlier, did find some companions who recognized the horror. "Some people," she says, "didn't try to minimize it, explain it away or rationalize it. They gave you their heart like a gift. One time, my favorite nurse sat down next to me at the cancer clinic and said, softly, 'I'd be meaning to tell you I lost a baby.'" Kate adds, "The way she said baby with the lightest touch, made me understand, gave me an insight, helped me to bear it. She'd nurtured the spark of life in her body and held that child in her arms and somewhere along the way, she'd been forced to bury that piece of herself in the ground."

The cross of Jesus isn't something to be explained by the minimizers, the teachers, the solvers. Like Kate's condition, it's all-consuming, bewildering, indescribable. But the story of Abraham and Isaac, like that nurse's soft intervention helps us understand. God says, "There is nothing more important than you." And I wonder if with gloves off, open hands, we might say that too. There's nothing more important than you, God. Here I am. Amen.