



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, JUNE 28, 2026
GENESIS 22:1-14; PSALM 13; ROMANS 6:12-23; MATTHEW 10:40-42

CAN WE TALK?

Genesis 22:1-14 *[God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “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 that I shall show you.” So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.” Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, “Father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham said, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So the two of them walked on together. When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place “The Lord will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.”]*

“Oh, my Gawd. Can we talk?” This is a signature phrase from my friend Julie, a native New Yorker, rabbi, and hospital chaplain. She would proclaim this whenever she was confronted with something really challenging. It could be almost anything — misbehavior from our kooky boss, a challenging ethical situation in the hospital, or extreme conflict from a patient or their family. “Can we talk?” was

always followed by a deep conversation in my office. Julie would *kvetch* but was she was not complaining — she was processing. Telling the story, explaining the details, identifying her feelings, listening to my response, and asking tough questions helped her make sense of the senselessness and often led to an insight into a previously impenetrable mystery. “Let me tell you a story,” was another one

of her signature lines. She would often interrupt the conversation to tell a story that might seem unrelated at first but would allow us to see things with a fresh perspective, often with deep spiritual insight.

So, this week as I was challenged by the appalling first reading we have from Genesis 22, I called Julie up and said, "Oh my God. Can we talk?" Christians, Jews, and Muslims all struggle with this passage about Abraham being commanded by God to sacrifice his son, Isaac, and we've struggled with it for about 4000 years. The command of God seems to conflict with the promise made to Abraham earlier in Genesis. Remember that God promised Abraham and Sarah that they would be the forbears of a great nation, but they were old and childless. Sarah miraculously gave birth to Isaac when she was 100 years old. The command and the promise are in conflict.

I don't know what's most disturbing. That God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son or that Abraham seemed willing to do it and Isaac went along with it. It doesn't make us religious people look very good to the non-believing world. For the atheist zealot Richard Dawkins, it's an example of religion's barbaric cruelty. In his book, *The God Delusion*, he writes, "this disgraceful story is an example simultaneously of child abuse, bullying in two asymmetrical power relationships, and the first recorded use of the Nuremberg defense: 'I was only

obeying orders' yet the legend is one of the great foundational myths of all three monotheistic religions."ⁱ

So, I asked Julie, "what do you do with Bible passages where God seemingly commands people to kill one another?" She said, "We ignore them. That's not who God is." And then she went on, "Whenever God is being obtuse, we make stuff up. We tell stories to get at the true spiritual meaning." She went on to tell me about *midrashim*, the stories and commentaries that rabbis throughout the centuries have written to understand, explain, and resolve troublesome texts.

Many midrashists have asked: Where was Sarah when this command was given to Abraham? A variety of stories have emerged to address this lacuna in the text. In one contemporary *midrash*, Rivkah Lubitch imagines that God comes to Sarah first and says, "Take your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac, and take him to the land of Moriah and offer him up." Sarah says to God, "No! A mother does not slaughter her children." Thus Sarah, passes the so-called "test."ⁱⁱ

The next morning Sarah discovers that neither Abraham nor Isaac are present. With horror, she recognizes that God said the same thing to Abraham, and he has made a completely different decision. She lifts up her arms to God and says, "I know that one who slaughters his son in the name of God will in the end be left without a son or God. Forgive Abraham, who was

mistaken about this.” At this moment, the *midrash* says, the angel of God calls out, “Abraham, Abraham, do not lay your hand on the boy” (Genesis 22:11–12). And in this way, all three are saved.

I love Sarah’s *no* in this story. It’s so real and comes out of her own wisdom, out of her own struggle and suffering. It also comes out of her instincts: the God of covenantal love would not ask me for something like this. Sarah’s full engagement — her whole self — contends with God in this moment. Sarah sees the threat that everything could be lost: not only her child, but also her relationship with God, and her faith, which is the foundation of her life. The same is true of Abraham.

There are many places in the Hebrew Bible that teach us that our relationship with God is a conversation. In Genesis 18, Sarah’s laughter about the possibility of Isaac’s birth opens a conversation with God about the meaning and purpose of destiny. Later in the chapter, Abraham himself negotiates with God about the fate of Sodom. Jacob wrestles with God who comes as an angel. Moses is in a decade’s long conversation with God about the fate of the Israelites. While there are many commands in these texts, the God of the Torah seems to require our engagement, our willingness to take up the conversation, to wonder, to question, to challenge, and perhaps even to say no.

But the binding of Isaac has never been one of those stories. We always celebrate Abraham’s blind obedience. Perhaps because of its terrifying nature or because God is asking the impossible, the binding of Isaac has most frequently been taken as a straightforward story about obedience. Why do we want to take this story literally? Maybe it’s not about God or our obedient response but rather about how to relate to the Divine within a covenant of love. A covenantal relationship requires trust and vulnerability by both parties.

This story shockingly reminds us that there are many ways to shirk our responsibility when it comes to the ongoing, life-long, profoundly demanding conversation with God. Maybe we imagine that we already know what God is asking of us, and we follow our sense of duty blindly. Maybe we turn over our inner authority to another human being. Maybe we doubt ourselves and our own perceptions so much that we don’t hold up our end of the conversation. Maybe we think we hear the voice of God and we’re just wrong. Maybe we ignore God’s inquiry into our lives. Maybe we silence our inner protest.

One of the things I learn from Sarah’s refusal is that, without engagement and intimacy, obedience is a mindless and brutal enterprise. True intimacy with God is both a conversation and an evolution that emerges from a willingness to speak from our own integrity. Looked at from

this perspective, God’s demand that Abraham kill Isaac is a strange gift, but a gift nonetheless. The absurdity of it shakes my sense of reality. It breaks open my cozy, self-satisfied, pre-packaged notions of God. If God only ever tells me what I want to hear, then no conversation is possible.

Instead, we might notice that to avoid becoming a dictator, God needs us to

participate, to hold up our end of the conversation, to struggle with what God asks of us. Maybe it’s in saying “no” that we can make a deeper and more authentic “yes” to God in faith. The command and promise are not in conflict because God always provides.

ⁱ Dawkins, Richard. *The God Delusion*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006.

ⁱⁱ Lubitch, Rivkah edited by Tamar Biala. *Dirshuni: Contemporary Women’s Midrash*. Brandeis University Press, 2022.



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