

Prophets, Prayer, and Peacemaking

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Texts: Matthew 10:40-42; Jeremiah 28:6-9; Genesis 22:1-14

This story from Genesis is exactly the sort of story that makes you ask, “What is the Bible good for? Why read it?” It is the kind of Bible story that really does make people wonder how to think about the Bible. Can we really take it seriously as a moral guide when one of the main early characters is brought to the edge of murdering his son... and is doing so in obedience to God? What kind of holy book is this? And more to the point, if we take it seriously at all: what does this story tell us about God?

How do we read the Bible? That’s really what all of these questions boil down to – is there a way to read the Bible so that it really can inform our living in these times?? Because we need a guide, we need moral teaching, and while we might wish for a checklist, we really know it’s not that easy.

There have always been disagreements, often passionate disagreements, between people but for a long time it seemed that we disagreed about how to respond to facts we mostly agreed on. These days we’ve come to understand that we don’t have a shared understanding about what the world looks like. And so we need guidance.

And while this may feel new to us, it has happened before. There have been other times in the past, including the distant past, when there was not a consensus about the nature of the world, or the nature of God. A lot of the ministry of the prophets in the Bible and of Jesus was in trying to cast a vision for what the world really looks like. That’s what prophets do. The important work of prophets is not to tell the future, although they do sometimes talk about the future. The key job of the prophet is to interpret the present – to give us a God’s-eye view of the world.

And in the time of Jeremiah, there were some profound disagreements about what the world looked like. Hananiah and Jeremiah represented two different views of the world. And it was a crisis moment – a moment where it is important to understand what is really real, so that you can know how to respond. Hananiah was assuring the king that God would be faithful to Jerusalem, and that faithfulness included guaranteeing Jerusalem’s safety. Jeremiah also was confident in God’s faithfulness, but he didn’t think that part of that faithfulness would mean that God would prevent an invasion from Babylon. Jeremiah and Hananiah had different understandings about God, and those shaped their understanding of the world and its possibilities and challenges. They were presenting different truth claims to the king, his advisers, and the people. And Jeremiah seems to suggest that at least later, in retrospect, people will be able to know who was speaking the truth. Can’t we find ways to seek understanding in the moment when we need it?

Abraham doesn’t seem to struggle at all. He is clear that God is speaking to him. This story, the story known as “The Binding of Isaac,” is certainly one of the stories that thoughtful people wrestle with. The whole story of Abraham raises many questions if you take it at all seriously. Let’s just go over the broadest outlines – Abraham is introduced to us in Genesis 11. He is known as Abram at that point, and God leads him away from his home to a new place. He also promises Abram that he and his wife Sarai, later known as Sarah, will be the parents of a nation – that their descendants will

be as numerous as the stars in the sky. Abram believes God, although both he and Sarai are advanced in age. God reiterates this promise after a few years have passed and it seems to be even more unlikely. At one point, Sarah persuades Abraham to have sex with her maid Hagar, and Abraham has a son with her, and this son is named Ishmael. But Sarah eventually has her own son with Abraham, and their son is Isaac. At this point, Sarah becomes very resentful of Ishmael and becomes very jealous of Hagar, and she sends them away. It is through the descendants of Ishmael that Islam comes into being. This is why Islam, Christianity, and Judaism are called the 3 Abrahamic religions.

What are we to make of the awful story in today's reading? There are so many distasteful elements in it: God testing Abraham for one, Abraham being blindly obedient in the near-sacrifice of Isaac, Abraham's apparently excluding Sarah from the decision, God requiring a sacrifice, and of course, the demand at the center of it – that Abraham kill his son. It seems like a horrible story.

The first year I was in seminary, we read this story in my "Introduction to the Old Testament" class. It was in reference to this story that I learned to ask the question "What did this story say to the people who first heard it?" It's a crucial question to ask when we read the Bible. And it's a question we often forget. We think about what a story might mean to us in our time – what it teaches us about how to live in the world today. And we think about the time that the story is set in – in this case, the time of Abraham. But remember, there are three time periods to consider when reading the Bible – the time in the story, in this case, the time of Abraham. And our own time. And the third time, the one that is easy to forget, is the time when the story was written. So, what did this story mean to the first people who heard it, the people in the time the story was written? Many scholars believe that at the time this story was written, it was telling the people that Yahweh, the God of Israel, does not want child sacrifice.

Is this a reasonable interpretation? Perhaps it is—and another familiar passage underscores this message. In the book of Micah, the prophet asks

“With what shall I come before the Lord,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” [Micah 6:6-7]

He asks whether God wants burnt offerings – does God want him to sacrifice a calf? Should he offer up his son? And the answer comes:

“He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?” [Micah 6:8]

In other words – don't sacrifice your child, don't even sacrifice animals – show your faith in your living. Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God.

So there are a couple of principles we can use in interpreting Biblical stories:

1. Always ask the question: What did this story say to the original hearers?
2. And, is the way we understand this story consistent with the other stories in the Bible?

That would have helped the people listening to Hananiah and Jeremiah – which version of a faithful God is consistent with other stories in the Bible? And with our own experience? Does the Bible teach us that God shows God’s faithfulness by preventing bad things from happening to people? Not at all. We might wish that this were the picture of God that we found, but it’s not.

By the time of Jeremiah, some pretty awful things had happened to some of God’s people. King David had lost his son Absalom in a terrible accident. The whole kingdom of Israel had divided into two kingdoms – Israel and Judah – and Israel had been invaded by Assyria. That fact itself should have alerted Hananiah to the likelihood that God’s faithfulness is not an insurance policy.

God’s faithfulness is not an insurance policy; it’s a relationship. It’s a relationship that we can participate in by prayer, which also helps us in discernment as we seek the mind of God, and rest in the heart of God. Another way to live in relationship with God is following the ways of God – being a peacemaker, working for justice, welcoming the immigrants and strangers, caring for the poor. But having a relationship with God is only part of the equation, right? After all, Abraham had a relationship with God, and he almost killed his son. It’s also important to have a good understanding of who God is – and that’s what Jesus came among us to reveal to us. So that gives us an important resource that Jeremiah and Hananiah and Abraham didn’t have. We can ask the question, is the God we imagine consistent with the God Jesus told us about?

Is God going to prevent national captivity, as Hananiah believed? No, clearly not – not only had God not prevented the defeat of Israel earlier, but also Jesus came in a time when the kingdom of Judah was occupied by the Romans, and Jesus didn’t fix that. And we now know that Jesus told us that indeed, people of faith who follow God’s ways might be persecuted and suffer.

Now, just to complicate matters, I need to acknowledge that there are different views of God presented in the Bible. The Bible is a collection of many of the writings of the Jewish people and early Christians, and these communities did not always agree about the nature of God and what faithful living required. Some believed that God was all about rules and punishments and for these people following the long lists of laws found in Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy were important. For the priestly class, God needed to be appeased through offerings and sacrifice and the rituals at the Temple were essential. For the prophets, the important thing about God was God’s deep love for people, and the most important thing for people is to respond to that love by living in kindness and justice. These different views of God in the Bible make discernment harder, to be sure. But we can always check our understanding of God by comparing it to the picture Jesus presented of God.

So here’s an example of how we can practice this way of discernment, and reading the Bible for guidance, and what a difference that can make.

Some people – many people – believe in a version of the death of Jesus that says it was planned by God. That Jesus was sent by God to die, as a perfect sacrifice to pay the price for our sins. In this version, which is often called a “substitutionary atonement theology,” Jesus died as a substitute for

us, so that we could be in relationship with God. And so the crucifixion was a good thing, because God wouldn't have let a bad thing happen to Jesus – hence Good Friday.

How can we examine this theological claim using some of what we just learned?

First, would God sacrifice his son? No, we've already learned that God doesn't want people to sacrifice their children. Why then would God sacrifice his son?

Second, we learned from Micah, that God doesn't let our sins be a barrier to a relationship – when Micah asked what he should do about his sins, God said to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. Micah is encouraged to be in relationship with God. The sins aren't a barrier to that. So again, a sacrifice wasn't wanted by God, and it wasn't necessary.

Third, we learned that Hananiah's version of God's faithfulness wasn't accurate. God's faithfulness isn't an insurance policy against bad things happening. If we believe it is, we will believe that people who have hard circumstances have been rejected by God. But we remember that Jesus reached out to those who suffer, and said that following God can lead to persecution. So it is more reasonable to understand the death of Jesus as being a bad thing that happened. A tragic thing. And it happened because Jesus was following God. His teachings upset people, particularly powerful people, and so they conspired to kill him. And God raised Jesus from the dead to vindicate him, to show that the way of Jesus was indeed the way of God.

Which of these interpretations is consistent with the God that Jesus described to us? Did Jesus tell us about a God who was looking to punish people for their sins? No, in today's reading, Jesus told us about a God who comes to us, a God of welcome, who wants us to care for the least among us, Other times Jesus taught that God is like a shepherd who was seeking his lost sheep. And that God was like the father of the prodigal son who rushed out to embrace his wayward son when he saw him at a distance, before the son could even ask forgiveness.

And here's why that is important to us as we seek to understand how to follow God ourselves. It's important that we understand that doing the right thing, doing the faithful thing, won't always lead to safe or happy results. It's important that we understand that so that we don't let the possibility of disapproval dissuade us from following God's way. Discernment is important. And in times like these when there are different truth claims, it's important to be able to sort out God's word, and to be able to think theologically so that we can avoid confusion about who God is and how we need to respond. God isn't a God who is waiting to pounce on our mistakes. God isn't a God who asks for us to sacrifice those nearest and dearest to us. God isn't a good luck charm to protect us against all difficulties. But God is a God who expects and wants our faithful responses, who wants us to live in kindness, work for justice, and care for those in need. And God is loving us always. Amen.