

The Aqedah and Centring Prayer
St. James Anglican Church, March 16, 2011
by William Morrow

Text: Genesis 22:1-19

Behind the shocking story of Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac is a horrifying reality. We know that peoples of the ancient Mediterranean world did sacrifice their children. As in the case of Abraham, such murderous worship was often directed to the highest deity they could conceive of. By giving up the most precious symbols of their own fertility and future, they hoped to prevent their social prosperity from being snuffed out and, paradoxically, to ensure their worldly success.

Insofar as the story of Abraham's sacrifice has any historical roots, I follow those who argue that this text records a decisive and courageous decision lying at the origins of Judaism and at the heart of the biblical tradition. There is a perception here of a high God sufficiently well disposed towards humankind so as to make child sacrifice not only unnecessary but ultimately unthinkable.

Nevertheless, this morning I propose to set aside historical questions and to read the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac as a metaphor for the spiritual life. To resort to Genesis 22 as a parable, if you like: a symbol or representation of an inner process that is intrinsic to the life of faith. Moreover, I will illustrate what I am talking about by appeal to my experience with a particular form of Christian mediation. But such a reading requires us to understand more of the cultural logic that the Abraham stories presuppose.

The logic of the Abraham stories assumes that one survived death by leaving behind a prosperous family with many children. This cultural tactic was meant not only to overcome human mortality, but various kinds of social death as well: including poverty, victimization by others, and social obscurity. It is remarkable to see how this cultural formula for successful self-preservation is implicitly defied by the call of God to sacrifice

Isaac. All of Abraham's hopes and dreams for social success will die with Isaac, and his worst fears of being a cultural failure will be realized.

We viscerally react to the story of Abraham's story as unethical. Where was Sarah when Abraham took it upon himself to sacrifice Isaac to God? Did she have no say in preserving the life of her only child? And what of Isaac; had he no say in whether he should live or die? And what of God; what kind of deity would demand such a terrible proof of faith? These are all legitimate questions. But these very questions reinforce the fact that the story is not interested in ethics but in something else. This is the point that I want to focus on this morning.

To do so, I begin by observing that, as in ancient times, we are born into cultures that have certain tried and true formulas for achieving success in life. And we engage in the pursuits that culture approves of as if our very lives depended on them. These include such well-known cultural pastimes as house, family, school, love, marriage, sex, career, politics, and church. We stake a great deal of our self-worth on the perception that we are winners, and pour contempt on ourselves when all we see is loss. That person inside of ourselves whose self-esteem lives and dies on the strength of its successes in society represents a sort of ordinary consciousness that we all live with. That is the voice that runs through our minds more or less constantly in a dialogue of worry, anxiety, planning, reflection, and remorse. In any given moment, most of our waking energies are given over to figuring out how to succeed at one task or the other. For lack of a better word, I will call this mind, this ordinary, garden-variety consciousness that we all share, the "ego;" or as some spiritual writers describe it, "the egoic mind."¹ In terms of the parable of Genesis 22, let us call that mentality "Isaac."

One of the great blessings of my life has been my introduction to, and practice of, a form of Christian meditation called "centring prayer." This form of meditation comes out of the Benedictine monastic tradition and is associated with modern thinkers such as Father

¹ See, e.g., Richard Rohr, *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013), pp. 27-57. What I refer to as the "egoic mind," Rohr would describe as the "false self."

Thomas Keating and the Anglican spiritual writer and priest, Cynthia Bourgeault.² It is rooted deeply in a form of Christian mysticism and practice that is sometimes called the “apophatic” tradition of prayer.

Especially in the Protestant tradition, great emphasis is placed on the role of reason and on articulate prayer. But there has always been another tradition of prayer in Christian circles that emphasizes wordless contemplation of God. This kind of prayer recognizes the fact that God is ultimately unknowable by human reason and insists that silence is God’s first language. According to the anonymous medieval mystical essay, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, God is present in a cloud of unknowing such that reason must stay outside, and which only love can penetrate. As the term apophatic indicates, this requires a kind of prayerful contemplation of God without words.

As a form of meditation, centring prayer is very simple. One sits quietly for about 20 minutes and practices a form of surrender. The object of the exercise is simply to sit in the presence of God. Of course, the ordinary mind continues to work but the point is not to dwell on thoughts that come up but simply to observe them passing by without becoming attached to them. Often you can use a “sacred word” when you find yourself starting to dwell on your thoughts that serves to bring you back to the place where you are simply sitting in the presence of God—not doing, not thinking, not planning, not worrying, just being.

Naturally, the egoic mind does not appreciate this lack of attention to itself. It may even suggest this lack of attention to its feverish preoccupation with survival and success is an immoral and profitless waste of time. But in those brief moments when I practice Centring Prayer, I attempt to sit in the divine presence and let all my thoughts about personal survival and success flow by without trying to hang onto them. I will not claim that I am very successful or talented in carrying out this form of wordless prayer. Probably, the time I actually achieve this other form of awareness can be measured in

² See, e.g., Cynthia Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer And Inner Awakening* (Cambridge, MASS: Cowley Press, 2004).

nanoseconds. Even so, daily I go up on the mountain to sacrifice Isaac—for 20 minutes at a time. And as with Abraham, I also get Isaac back. I do not lose him irrevocably; and both I and my egoic mind come back down off the mountain. But for a brief moment in time, I try and recognize the claim of another realm of being on the one that I ordinarily inhabit.

Personal success and personal survival: are there any more important values in the world than these? According to the biblical parable, this is the challenge that came so starkly to Abraham when God called him to sacrifice his only, beloved son. The same challenge comes to us this morning—not least through this holy meal. In Christ, God reveals a love for all of us that neither physical nor social death can overcome, and invites us to participate in a mindset independent of all our cultural performances no matter how sterling or how poor. Taste and see that the Lord is good.