

Childhood memories, at least my childhood memories, tend to fixate on the smallest, oddest things. My paternal grandfather lives on for me in that fragmented but vivid way. Since he died when I was still relatively young, I don't remember much about big family dinners to celebrate his birthday or what he and my grandmother may have given me for Christmas. What I remember about Granddaddy is his quiet, almost hoarse laugh, how I wondered at how he could possibly be comfortable in his favorite stiff-backed wooden rocking chair when his own back was so stooped, how his face, weathered and often stern looking (at least to my young eyes), would light up when he would play the one song he knew how to play on the piano- “Possum Up A ‘Simmon Tree”.

One other clear memory I have of him is that he would have the TV blasting with reruns of “The Lawrence Welk Show”. I was a kid who loved television (and, truth be told, I'm an adult who still loves it more than I probably should), so I was always game for sitting a little too close to the set or having the volume up a little too loud. Still, even for me, this was intense. Granddaddy was very hard of hearing, but he absolutely refused to get a hearing aid. And so, the TV blared. I may never sort out whether I actually remember hearing him say this or I have just heard the retelling in family lore enough times that I think I remember it, but when his adult children pressed him on the issue of his hearing loss he famously replied, “I hear all I need to hear!” We all laugh about this because Granddaddy could certainly be stubborn—he mowed the lawn and drove until a few weeks before he died at age 96—but also because in some ways he was probably right. Maybe he didn't need to hear his grandkids whining, or the latest tragic headlines on the nightly news. But I wonder sometimes if he ever felt like he was missing something. I wonder if he might have heard something surprising, or wonderful, or challenging, or important if he had had something to help him.

I found myself thinking of Granddaddy as I struggled with this story from Genesis. I know the story, but it is not one I like to think of much. When it comes to this drama of tests from God and close calls and, frankly, abusive behavior, I don't really want to hear it. I have the stories of God making good on the promise of a child to Abraham and Sarah and of Jesus helping hurting people stored away in my heart. I've heard all I want to hear. But just maybe I haven't actually heard all I *need* to hear.

This text is hard. There are many things about it that make me incredibly uncomfortable. For instance, not only does God reportedly decide that after all Abraham had already been through he needed more testing, but then God tests Abraham by asking him to sacrifice Isaac, his son, his only son, whom he loves, as a burnt offering. This does not sound like the God I know, nor does it really sound like a God I would want to know. Then there's the fact that Abraham seems ready to obey this command! I have tried to think of some loophole to get around these things, but I'm going to confess here and now that I haven't really come up with one. Maybe after some Seminary training I'll come back with knowledge to share that will make this easier to swallow, but from the bit that I've read on this text and the conversations that I've had, I doubt it. And yet...and yet we have this story and God speaks through scripture, so it's important that we keep trying to listen. Maybe we haven't heard all we *need* to hear.

Perhaps that listening is what this story is about. Sometimes life and faith require us to listen, even if we don't understand, and even if it's hard. Abraham had been traveling long before he took the three-day trek with Isaac in this story. From the moment God first called out to Abraham and said, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you”, Abraham had been walking with God. Through all of it, God had been a conversation partner and Abraham had been listening. The listening that Abraham practiced had not always meant blind acceptance of what was said, though. If we look just a few chapters earlier in Genesis we read that Abraham is told of God's plans to destroy Sodom and Abraham questions and bargains with God, reminding God of God's faithfulness and justice. In fact, he seems to actually change God's mind. Although the eventual outcome didn't change, Abraham had truly conversed with God. This was no passive listening.

I don't know why Abraham doesn't question God on this command to sacrifice Isaac. According to the actual text that we have, there doesn't seem to be any argument. Perhaps he heard in this apparent command from God echoes of the surrounding cultures. Child sacrifice was not an unheard of thing for ancient societies, particularly in times of distress. There is also some thought that a cult who worshipped the god Molech practiced child sacrifice of firstborn sons as a way to ensure future children. If Abraham had been aware of this type of practice, perhaps he thought that this was the only way to ensure that God would fulfill the promise of numerous descendants after having just sent Ishmael away. We will probably never know why Abraham doesn't appear to push back, but maybe that isn't the point anyway. Even after this command, Abraham remained in relationship with God.

Part of listening, including when we're trying to listen to what we are being told through scripture, is paying attention to context. The stories of Genesis, and in fact the entire first five books of the Old Testament, were likely not actually written and edited into this final form until after the Babylonian exile. While the stories, laws, and traditions had undoubtedly been passed down orally and interpreted from generation to generation, at a certain point it became important for the community to have all of this set down in writing. Given this context, maybe this story isn't so much a historical retelling of an interaction between Abraham and God in the way that we think of historical accounts, but rather part of how a community came to grips with the trauma of exile and a return to their land, but not necessarily to the “good old

days". Just as it could have seemed to Abraham like God's promise was on the verge of being broken as he walked with Isaac to Moriah, so too for Israel it could have seemed like God had abandoned them. They had endured years with no land of their own, no formal community, no temple for worship, and now that they had returned, things were not the same as before. How were they to live now? They listened, again, to these very stories for guidance.

Regardless of how we read the story, though, it is vital that Abraham listens. Abraham has to remain open to the conversation with God at every point in the story. As things are framed, God does not actually intend for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, nor is that what God would desire. We are told that Abraham passes the test, but in what sense? Esther Menn, professor of Old Testament at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago raises this point in her commentary on this passage, asking, "Did God expect Abraham to obey whole-heartedly, repressing all paternal feelings toward the son who addresses this "father of a multitude" trustingly as "my father" (Gen. 22:7)? Did God hope that Abraham would ignore all ethical considerations to murder an innocent child and destroy the image of God that he embodied (Gen. 9:5-6)? ...Or was God curious to see if Abraham would resist his order to sacrifice the son of promise?" She continues, "God's last-minute intervention suggests that Abraham's response was inadequate. Abraham may have deserved credit for his motivation and his devotion, but his behavior called for swift correction in order to spare the child."¹ Menn's questioning led me to notice the critical importance of Abraham's listening for that urgent, last-minute angel cry of "Abraham, Abraham!"

As important as listening is to this relationship between Abraham and God, and between Israel and God, response is also important. As all of us know, relationships are two way streets. True conversation, and understanding, cannot happen in a monologue. Abraham had to not only hear but respond, and respond he did. "Here I am", he says to both of God's addresses. God did not desire child sacrifice and Abraham, thankfully, responded to the call to stop. Abraham had to hear and discern whether this was the voice to listen to. The people of Israel, being reminded of their identity as God's people, had to listen anew and discern how to live into that identity after their exile. As the church, as a congregation, and as individual children of God, we also need to listen and discern. What voices are we listening to and what are we choosing to hear? This is a test we face constantly.

Perhaps more than any generation before us, we are living in a time where a multitude of voices and messages are vying for our attention. We've got the reporters and pundits on tv, our social media circles, our family and friends, our own voices of fear, and many more all blaring at us like Granddaddy's TV. How do we listen and discern? Brian spoke at the start of this year about being "Bible-ish". This word that he coined described his hope that we would become familiar with our scriptures and let the truths that God speaks through them sink into our hearts and our bones so deeply that we would truly become the hands and feet of Christ. These stories, even the challenging ones like this one, are given to us as a voice to tell us who we are and how we are to live. These stories that spoke to Israel are here to speak to us still. The words of the prophets that challenged and encouraged Israel to pursue justice and mercy are here to challenge and encourage us still. We neglect them at our own peril, and that of the rest of our world. Later in her commentary on Genesis 22, Esther Menn points out that we are still sacrificing the well-being of children, even now, despite God's command to stop. We don't have to look far to see that this is so, although there are countless ways that children are being sacrificed to war, famine, changing climates, and disease around the globe. We have schools just down the Avenue that lack enough of even the basic resources to teach their students. Here in our own city as well as across the country, the lives of many children and youth are threatened by things like gun violence, racism, inadequate or unequal access to housing, food, and health care, and sometimes even the criminal justice system.

How can we listen for God's call to end this sacrifice, or for that matter, how can we listen for what other things God would have us do or cease? We have these stories. Even more than this, though, we have Jesus Christ. Jesus is, as he says, the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. Jesus is our example of what a life of obedience to God's desires, and what the full and eternal life God desires for us, truly looks like. God doesn't want child sacrifice, but God does ask for something costly, and that is discipleship--following closely and working together with God for the well-being of all of God's beloved children.

This task is daunting, but the good news of the Gospel is this: God did not just give us an example in Jesus, but through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, God also showed us that God's relationship with us has no end—not even death. As God provided a ram to ensure that Abraham and Isaac could continue to walk on together, so God provides God's very self to ensure that we will never be alone in our own trials or in the work that we are called to do. God is with us on our way as a community and as individuals. The Holy Spirit strengthens us to persevere and helps us to hear God's voice. We have a conversation partner who knows us fully, who loves us dearly, and who will never, ever abandon us or let us go. So let us truly hear all we *need* to hear, not just what we *want* to hear. Let us listen for God's voice in one another, in the voices of those whom we sometimes choose not to hear, in the words of Scripture, and in the person of Jesus Christ. Let us listen, even to the stories with which we wrestle. May God guide us to discern God's call and respond in obedience and gratitude.

¹ Esther M. Menn, *Commentary on Genesis 22:1-14*, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=114