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One of the things you may have noticed by now that has come with the Episcopal church's move to the revised common lectionary is that we are hearing Bible stories we never heard before in church. I think you will be happy to know that the Standing Liturgical Commission in its infinite wisdom seems to have decided, we, the baptized, are all smarter than we have sometimes previously been given credit for.

It is now possible, it seems, to trust us to make sense of some of the most powerful and important pieces of scripture in the Bible, even when they do not lend themselves to straight forward, easy explanations. Today's Old Testament lesson is clearly one of those passages.

Some scriptures seem to have been written from their beginnings to be understood on a depth of levels, and if ever there was a scripture that needed this, it has to be the story of the sacrifice of Isaac.

I think all of us are greatly relieved to hear that archeologists and anthropologists believe this story is most likely a story meant not to support human sacrifice but to attest to the end of child sacrifice practices in the Neolithic culture of early Middle Eastern life. It is a story that clearly outlines the rejection of the practice of human sacrifice by the early Hebrew people.

Reading this story from that objective, scientific perspective solves a lot of problems for modern Jewish, Muslim, and Christian people. It allows us to take one of the most dramatic and haunting stories of our faith tradition and massage the awful, terrifying elements right out of it.

The problem is the story is too poignant, too intense, too pathos filled to just rationalize it away. It is one of the great myths of our tradition and has a deeper hold on us than that. That

haunting image of Isaac bound on the altar and Abraham praying to God with the knife in his hand does not just go away. The idea of a test from God so demanding that even a person with Abraham's faith might not pass it, stays with us. And in part it stays with us because we have known and often loved people who seem to have been forced to live through just such tests.

If we are telling the truth about this story of the sacrifice of Isaac, there has to be a yes but answer to the anthropologists. Of course God does not want us to offer our first born children in human sacrifice! And of course God never wanted that. It was our own primitive religious impulses that may have led early human beings to do such a horrific irrational act. Of course God does not want our children to die! God wants us to love and protect our children, to keep them out of harm's way—not make them sacrifices!

BUT many of us have come to know God does want something from us. Faith does eventually exact something from us or it never becomes true faith. God, at some point in our lives, asks for our complete no holds barred unconditional trust. God asks us to trust that no matter what comes, no matter what hardship we are forced to endure, no matter what loss we experience, no matter what hopes we see dashed in our lives, we come to trust that even in these moments....or perhaps especially in these moments, God is still there with us, loving us, upholding us, and somehow in a way that we cannot yet see but still must trust, God is bringing forth life out of death.

We are not good at talking about this part of faith, except perhaps at funerals where there's not much left to lose. The one other place where we even come close to touching the heart of this sacred covenant is when we participate in the baptism of a child. We testify in baptism that being a family of faith, a household of faith, means something both dreadful and wondrous all in the same held breath.

If we are truthful with ourselves and with God, we know that in baptism we hand our children over to be wrested from our protective arms and buried in the waters of baptism. It is, we always hope and pray as parents, grandparents, and sponsors the only brief moment in our lives when we will even come close to acknowledging the mortality of our children, the vulnerability of our children, and the horrible truth filled reality that as much as we love them and as much as they are and always will be a part of us, in the end even our children do not really belong to us. They belong to God.

And if we are really listening to this story of Abraham and if we are really listening to the prayers of our baptismal rite, we learn that not only do our children not belong to us. But in the end we do not even belong to ourselves. We too, in all our hopefulness, all our brokenness, all our bravado, all our certainty and uncertaintywe cannot belong to ourselves, we can only...only belong to God. That's the irony of mortality. In the end as powerful as we may seek to become, we are left powerless in the face of human existence. We cannot protect ourselves from suffering and uncertainty. We can only put our trust in the one who is greater than ourselves, the one who is God. And God can and must be trusted with our loved ones, with our futures, with our lives.

How can we love such a God? Well how can we not? Who else but God has the power to heal, to save, to love us back into wholeness, to repair our broken hearts, or mend our tattered souls? Who else could we trust our lives to other than the one who promises to love us more deeply and more fully than we are even capable of loving our most cherished loved ones and our selves? Who else but God?

Why was Abraham willing to place Isaac on the altar? Because Abraham knew that for every moment of Isaac's life he had never been anywhere else. He knew that he was not giving

Isaac to God but acknowledging that from the beginning Isaac had always been God's child and there was no more trustworthy a parent to be had than God.

In the cataclysmic moments of our lives when we, like Abraham, come to know ourselves to be small and vulnerable and weak and powerless who else can we look to? To whom else can we offer up our lives? To whom else but our gracious God?