

I feel about this story the way Dr. Seuss's character feels about green eggs and ham. I do not like it in a box. I do not like it with a fox. I do not like it on a boat. I do not like it with a goat. This story is the *Green Eggs and Ham* of the Bible: most people don't like what's being offered here, and if you do or you are ok with it, then a lot of people have a lot of questions for you:

This story brings up so many questions, many of which are unanswerable to us. And most of the answers we find rely on us adding something that isn't in the original story to make it make sense: that Isaac, somehow, was in on the whole idea or that Sarah chased after them with a ram and threw it in the thicket just in time.

When we do all of this, we do it to make ourselves comfortable with an awful story. And this isn't a story that is supposed to make us feel comfortable. We're not supposed to be comforted by it. And, yet, even in our discomfort we can find good news.

READ SCRIPTURE

The only thing we can add to the story without changing the plot and the dialogue and the choices the characters make is motive. Why are they doing what they do?

We don't get any stage directions in the scripture so we have to determine motive on our own. The easiest way to do that is to look at what the characters, including God, have done up to this point. We can only assume past behavior is an indicator of future behavior, so what have they done before we meet them here today?

God has already promised Abraham that he will be the father of many nations. God has already delivered on the promise that Sarah will give birth to a son. And as we read last week, God made everything and called it good, and walked with Adam and Eve in the garden and asked them questions, and even when God got so disappointed in his creation, God put a rainbow in the sky as a reminder that God would never destroy the creation he loved ever again.

And Abraham, for his part, has been faithful. He's gone where God has led him. He's trusted in what he could not see or understand. He's been nothing but devoted to God's call. So why do we end up here with a God who has repeatedly chosen forgiveness and connection over vengeance telling this faithful guy taking his son up a mountain to sacrifice him?

This isn't a test of Abraham's faith. It's a test of his relationship with God. I think God is unsure of how close they are to each other. God wants to know whether or not God has finally found with Abraham what never came to be with Adam and Eve and all the others before. God thinks Abraham's the guy and he wants to be sure.

DATE W/ ELIZABETH: SOMETHING ON YOUR FACE...

God makes this horrible request because God believes they are so close that Abraham will say no. That Abraham will point out how it goes against everything God has done before. And God will breathe a sigh of relief and go on blessing Abraham and his family.

But he doesn't say no. Abraham says ok. He feared God literally. We read "fear of God" and think it's awe or piety or whatever, but that's not what God wants. God doesn't want awe. God doesn't want piety (what do the prophets say? Burnt offerings are meaningless?). God desires our heart. And God certainly doesn't demand fear.

I can't believe that any god who wants in on Creation, who makes a mistake and puts a sign in the sky as a reminder never to do it again, who blesses a barren family with a child later in life wants to be feared. That God, our God, wants a relationship.

And what is a relationship, but a space where we can be honest? Where we can bring our questions and our fears and doubts and lay them out without fear of judgment or alienation. **No healthy relationship is ever built on one side always doing what the other wants.**

God tests Abraham because he wants to see if they can be honest with one another. And Abraham makes it clear that they cannot.

Sure, Abraham has faith, but it's faith that believes if he doesn't do everything God says, if he doesn't say yes all the time, then God will punish him or remove a blessing or whatever. It's a transactional faith. It's all about Abraham and what he gets out of it, what's in it for him.

Yes, God says, "I will bless you, Abraham for obeying my words," after he's put Isaac on the altar, but guess what? Abraham and Isaac never speak again. The only thing Abraham does for him is send some folks out to find him a wife after his mother dies. And we never hear from Sarah again either. Abraham cries over her, but we never hear anymore stories or prayers or anything from them together again.

God blessed him, but for what? Abraham got what he wanted, but look at what it cost him.

And not just him, but Isaac too. And Esau. And Jacob's sons. Every generation on down the line. Yes, there is blessing and, yes, there are generations of descendants, but there are generations of descendants who continue to bear the trauma of the past in their present.

What might have happened, how much less pain for a lot of folks would there be, if Abraham had quoted Meatloaf? "I would do anything for love, but I won't do that."

If there's anything to learn from this story, it's that we can't sacrifice the hope of future for our comfort in the present and expect great things to keep happening in our midst. We can't say yes to what we want to happen, if it requires someone else's pain. We might get all the blessings God promised us, but we will end up empty and estranged. CAT IN BOWL MEME.

When we look at the story this way, it can become a metaphor without whitewashing all the discomfort out of it. It becomes a metaphor for a lot of things, but especially for the Church.

We've talked a lot about Church recently. I read an article last week by Rob Dyer, a Presbyterian minister, entitled, "They Aren't Coming Back." It was all about how for decades we've said all those who left the church and never wanted to speak about it or be about it ever again, "Oh they'll come back when they get married or have kids or after COVID or whatever," but they haven't. And he argued they won't unless the Church acknowledges why so many have left and works toward healing the wounds.

Dyer claimed that many have been traumatized not just by the experience of the last two years or by previous administrations or by the general trajectory of our society, but also by religion, by the things we in the Church have clung to (ideas, practices, structures) because they're what we know and we've been afraid of what might happen if we let them go or said "No" or ended up saying "Yes" to something else.

There are a lot of Isaacs out there who wish Abraham would have said, "*What am I supposed to do?*" instead of "That'll work for me." There are a lot of Isaacs who've been hurt by our uneasiness with risking what **we want** for what God has promised, our discomfort with letting go of all we've ever known in exchange for all that we could ever imagine.

If we want bring healing into the world, into all the places where pain and suffering and even ambivalence have taken root, then we have to do what Abraham couldn't: start difficult conversations and ask big, hard questions (even of God). We have to get close enough to God and trust that the God who called us good from the start and promised never to hurt us again wants to be close to us too. We have to give God the relationship with us he's always wanted.

That's what God got with Jesus. That's what God wants with us.

I promised you good news at the beginning. Here it is: God was trying to see if the relationships that were strained by others could be renewed with Abraham. God wants the messiness of a real relationship full of big questions and ugly crying and two sides or a whole community dropping all the pretense and piety and saying, "*Can I be honest with you? I'm not sure about that,*" and sometimes there is yelling and anger, but underneath it and beyond it and within it, there is nothing but love.

I'd rather risk God being upset with me for saying "No" to a ludicrous request than end up empty and estranged from the hope God's promised me because I was afraid to ask or unwilling to get so close to God that I knew I could ask. I feel that way because I know God loves us enough to forgive us if we need forgiving and that all that God wants is to be so close to us that we can share openly and honestly about everything. Even the things we're unsure of.

When I think about this story this way, I start to think I might like *Green Eggs and Ham*. Amen.