Kierkegaard succeeds so well at capturing the evasive invitation of Genesis 22. Reading the first time, all seems clear. Abraham was tested, he passed the test, he was rewarded. It’s united, it’s square- things are well with the Patriarch. But mayhaps we read the story again, later on in life, or with the type of great earnestness that can only accrue in successive visits to a text. We read the story again, and this time we trip.. stumbling on the road to Moriah, our jacket catches on a bramble. We fall down, get bogged down- why am I even on this journey? What’s it worth? What’s at stake? Only when our reading isn’t easy, when the story bites back, when we must wonder if it’s worth the effort to continue are we beginning to read with a vigor that brings these question to hand, and only then are we truly reading the akedah.

So why would we persist? What’s at stake and why continue? As Christians, we must walk the road to Moriah, for it leads to Easter, and to Faith. Hear John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son.” Sound familiar? “Take your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac…” Or hear Romans 8:32, where Paul speaks of God as “He who did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all…” Again, echoes of the Akedah: “you have not withheld your son, your only one, from me.”

Father handing over an only son to near death, a resurrection of sorts, and a resulting promise- it’s the story of the akedah, and of the Cross; of Easter- at which our songs about the lamb who was slain carry an implicit reference back to the ram taking Isaac’s place at Moriah. Isaac bears the wood, Jesus bears the cross. The akedah bears the imagery and sacrificial context
that make sense of Easter. It also bears Abraham, who becomes a paradigm of Christian faith. Paul refers to him as the first ancestor of Christianity, justified by faith as he was, and Kierkegaard’s exploration of him as the Knight of Faith is legendary. Thus Christianity must own the tensions of Abraham, and of the akedah.

So too, as Jewish readers, we must walk to Moriah, for Abraham is the father of Isaac, who is the father of Jacob- who becomes Israel. The stories of the Patriarchs are stories of the origins of the Jewish people, the first and most basic tales of Jewish self-conception. Abraham’s ongoing covenant with God is the core of Jewish chosenness. And his testing becomes a paradigm for a Jewish history that defines the word ‘trying.’ Abraham’s test is taken through the ages as an archetype, a general model of Jewish chosenness. Abraham’s chosenness is Judaism’s: existence in a special, though demanding, sometimes brutal, relationship with God.

Moriah, the land of Isaac’s binding, translates from the Hebrew as “seeing,” and there both Christian and Jewish traditions are bound alongside Isaac, bound to see and to be seen by God. The akedah is core to both traditions, thus though the road to Moriah is hard, it is necessary, as people of faith, to embark.

Of course, that notwithstanding, it’s actually really tough to get there! Take Kierkegaard’s guy- he reads and reads, but understands less and less. He remembers that beautiful old story and wants to go again, but gets tripped up on the same old path. Bridges no longer span the valleys. He has to do the footwork, and can’t always find the way. But he’s no fool. His confusion is legitimate. His puzzlement is acquaintance. Now we know he’s read well and vigorously, with a truly earnest desire to see.
We want to read well too, of course. We admire that earnest desire to see Abraham, to accompany him. But what pot-holes mar the road to Moriah? What will trip us up? There are more than a few to give us pause.

First, where did Sarah go? In Genesis 21, she’s the proud mother of the miracle child Isaac. She demands Hagar’s banishment- she’s running the show! Also in 23, directly following the Akedah, she is powerfully present- her death begins the chapter. But where is she in Genesis 22 when her firstborn is being sacrificed? Is the shock of being left out, only later finding out about the binding what kills her? Or might it be the shock of running out to greet the returning travelers, only to realize Isaac is not among them?

Yes, *Isaac not with them*. This is a second hole to fall into. Though Abraham tells the young men, in v. 5, that he and Isaac will worship and then *both* return, though the text states *twice* that Abraham and Isaac went up the mountain together, it is quite clear that Abraham returns alone, then he dwells at Beersheba alone- in the singular, without Isaac.

How puzzling! At first reading, all was smooth, yes? No one seemed disturbed. There were no problems, no statements about emotions. They weren’t important! What mattered was that the test was passed!! Father Abraham kept the faith! Ahh yes, simplicity…

But it just doesn’t hold up to the text. Part of the story really seems to be untold. Isaac doesn’t come home! He isn’t around for Sarah’s death, and he’s simply gone for the next 3 chapters of Genesis (which, by the way, involves the selection of his bride by Abraham). Where does he go? We don’t know, but we do see that he shares the stage with Abraham only one more time. In a reunion that is no party- Isaac comes home to Beersheba only when Abraham’s already dead, and only to bury his father. And he buries him with Ishmael! This is Ishmael, whose lasting memory of Abraham must be the cruel silhouette vanishing on the horizon of the
wilderness into which he and his mother Hagar are sent, by Abraham, in Gen 21. Isaac is bound, Ishmael is banished; how do they greet their father’s memory? Perhaps they just want to make sure he’s really gone.

…

The patriarch Abraham, great father of generations, has seemed in Genesis 22 to pass the test. Yes, but his wife dies. Yes, but his sons are gone, estranged? Yes, but even God speaks to him no more, after the akedah. Abraham remarries, and he has kids, but the new wife’s no more than a name. She doesn’t even come to the funeral.

Grand Abraham, who passed the test, perhaps, yet who is alone. The patriarch’s family has been ripped apart. It’s very sad, and pulls us into another hole, the one Job digs for us. Seeing the cruelty of the tests- the psychological trauma it must have caused Abraham, Isaac, Sarah - we question God’s justice. Did they deserve this test? Is God just and praiseworthy, who leveled this trial, this brokenness at a righteous man? Is God just, who called for the death of an innocent child?

Yes, Abraham would seem to have passed the test, but in passing he truly has sacrificed. It was only a test! Yes, but someone got trampled when God yelled “Fire!” in that movie theater. Someone died alone, someone was bound. Is the call for sacrifice just? Does Job deserve to lose all of his children, and does the return of ‘new ones’ make all that suffering moot? That Isaac at some point came down from the mountain, does that erase the event? All these tests- of Abraham, of Job, of Isaac even, also imply tests of God’s justice. And does God pass?

Another hole: Abraham’s statement to Isaac in verse 8, that God will provide the lamb for the offering. Is he dodging Isaac’s question, prophesying, expressing a hope, speaking of Isaac the miracle child as the lamb? Isaac seems to accept his father’s answer, for they continue on
together, but its meaning is cryptic, and it renders the sense in which Abraham participates in the
test unclear.

And another hole: two endings. The angel of the lord comes to Abraham twice, which
many commentators have ascribed to multiple authorship. The two speeches are very different
in both style and theology. The first message concludes the test by simply telling Abraham not
to harm Isaac, for “now I know that you are god-fearing.” The second says quite a bit more, that
because Abraham has offered Isaac, he will have many offspring, etc. The second messenger
doesn’t stop at god-fearing, but grounds God’s covenant with Abraham in his obedience.

Should the two messages be read additively, each describing a certain aspect and
outcome of the test, or is the second message, as many scholars have suggested, a later addition
unfaithful to the original message of the text? The ending might be the most important part of
the story, so it’s actually really important how we choose to read here. What God’s
representative says to wrap up the akedah essentially demarcates the point of the text and the
test. The two speeches sum up the ambiguity of the text itself- multiple layers of composition
are present, and they all cover the others up. Multiple agendas can be seen, and multiple agendas
within one holy text means a difficult interpretive task. How will we sort it out?

That’s the question, really, “how will we sort it out?” For the holes are there in any
reading worth its salt, with a bit of earnestness to it. The holes are there, and may well remain.
How will we sort them out? What we might try to do this coming week, in the company of great
scholars from all 3 Abrahamic traditions, is to try to notice what holes we fall into, how we fall
into them, and how we respond to other fallings. Not everyone falls by the same physics, nor
everyone in the same places. Perhaps we’ll stumble together in new places, encounter a new
shading of the text, and understand a new dimension of its truth.
This week, let us seize the opportunity to be earnest together about a text of Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and basic existential human significance. Let us listen respectfully, but conscious of what’s at stake in the binding. Let us hear, conscious of where we stand, but willing to entertain the possibility that we may be wrong. Let us always be willing to read and hear the text in such a way that we are vulnerable, open to questions and change, with true understanding our final standard

Not self-protection, not self-justification, not self.

In and out of the akedah, it’s a good principle- strive to encounter the Ultimate, not to remain safe in yourself.

As Abraham is ordered, let us “lekh-lekha” – Go, get yourself- see and be seen,

In this week and always.
MORNING WORSHIP
Friday, April 9, 2010

Prelude
Welcome/Announcements

Opening Hymn “Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise” ELW #834, vv 1-4

Readings
Genesis 22:1-19

“There was once a man who as a child had heard that beautiful story about how God tested Abraham and how he withstood the test, kept the faith, and received a son a second time contrary to expectation. When the man became older, he read the same story with even greater admiration, for life had separated what had been united in the child’s pious simplicity. Indeed, the older he became, the more often his thoughts turned to that story; his enthusiasm became stronger and stronger, and yet he could understand the story less and less. Finally he forgot everything else because of it; his soul had only one wish, to see Abraham, one longing, to have been a witness to that event…”

- Soren Kierkegaard, ‘Fear and Trambling’

Message “Tuning Up: A Preliminary Outpouring” Matt Haar, ‘07

Hymn “The God of Abraham Praise” ELW #831, vv. 1, 2, 4

Lord’s Prayer
L: Eternal Spirit,
C: Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver, source of all that is and that shall be, Father and Mother of us all. Loving God, in whom is heaven. The hallowing of your name echoes through the universe! The way of your justice be followed by the peoples of the earth! Your heavenly will be done by all created beings! Your commonwealth of peace and freedom sustain our hope and come on earth. With the bread we need for today, feed us. In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us. In times of temptation and test, spare us. From the grip of all that is evil, free us. For you reign in the glory of the power that is love, now and forever. Amen

Benediction
L: May God bless you and may your days be filled with wonder, wrapped in joy, touched by beauty, and surrounded by peace. May you go forth in true earnestness - don’t turn your back! - and may the blessings of God forever lead you on your way.

Dismissal
L: Wake up! Don’t be lazy. Follow the right path, avoid the wrong, Be of good heart!
C: OK, we will!

Postlude

CAMPUS MINISTRY ANNOUNCEMENTS

SENIOR SERMONS - For those of you who will be seniors next year, there is a sign-up sheet in the Narthex for those of you who would like to do a senior sermon. Please chat with Pr. Ann or Carol if you have any questions.

GREEN FEST - Sat., Apr. 11th there will be an event sponsored by Augie Green and Focus the Nations. There will be education sessions from 103 in GSC 100, a panel discussion at 4 pm and food and music on the green at 5 pm. Everyone is welcome!

AKEDA CONFERENCE - AKEDA CONFERENCE
On Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, April 13-15, 2010, nationally-known scholars representing Jewish, Muslim, and Christian points of view will discuss the Old Testament story of Abraham and the sacrificial offering of his son Isaac. The narrative from Genesis 22 is also known as the Akeda. As part of the conference, Emily Lodine and Russell Svenningsen will perform “Abraham and Isaac,” a short cantata by Benjamin Britten at 3:30 p.m. on Tuesday, accompanied by Debra Reid. Conference events will take place in Kresge Recital Hall. Find details at www.augie.edu/religion.

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Mon., Apr. 12th Worship, 10 am - Jill Storm, Reli.
Tues., Apr. 13th Koinonia, 10 am
Friday, Apr. 16th Worship, 10 am - Peter Schotten, Govt.
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Friday, April 9, 2010

Prelude
Laura Ayres

Welcome/Announcements

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