

Augustana College  
Chapel of Reconciliation

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Akeda

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***A Brief, Traditional, Somewhat Mundane, and Not Very Original Commentary  
on the Akeda as a Reflection upon God's Divine Justice***

No biblical narrative is more puzzling, or more provocative, than the Akeda. God's deeply troubling test, His injunction that Abraham should "take your favored one, Issac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights which I will point out to you" resonates to this day. Its themes are universal and timeless. Its questions are numerous and haunting. We were privileged to hear those questions examined these past several days at Augustana's Akeda conference. There, once again, we were reminded that three important religious traditions have grappled with the implications arising from this narrative. But intellectual divisions have arisen, not only among these traditions, but within them as well. And regarding the questions and themes raised by this Biblical account, philosophers have not exactly been missing in action either. Among others, Hobbes, Spinoza, Kant, Hegel and most famously Kierkegaard, have all weighed in.

Is there anything meaningful left to say, especially by a person far from an expert in the field? I am not sure. Perhaps it might be appropriate to make one or two observations. I am reminded of Leon Kass's observation that Genesis outlines humanity's early moral development in general and Abraham's moral education in particular. Abraham is the first person in Hebrew Scriptures whom we get to know. We observe his life, his trials and his decisions in detail. As we observe him, we are asked to consider what is it about Abraham that causes God to proclaim that Abraham and his descendents will "become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations are to bless themselves by him," because, as God proclaims, I have known him (singled him out)" so (God continues) that he may "command his children and his household after him, to heed God's [My] ways by doing what is just and right." Abraham is both blessed and is himself, a blessing. Thus, Abraham will keep God's righteous ways and God will bless Abraham with progeny, with land, and with earthly immortality. Understood in this way, Abraham is a kind of founder, a person who played an indispensable role in the eventual creation of a people rooted in a place but fundamentally defined by their acceptance of God's righteous way of life. For that reason, Abraham's blessing, his legacy to us, is justice. In the course of Genesis, Abraham had faced numerous challenges and has become, not simply a man righteous in his own time, but a man who is righteous simply. For that reason, Abraham's life generally, and the Akeda particularly, constitutes a pinnacle of an enduring education in justice and illustrates what God's

justice and righteousness mean. As numerous commentators remind us, Abraham in the course of Genesis becomes a teacher of the knowledge of justice. Said another way, Abraham's education in justice constitutes not only his education, but ours.

Recall earlier God has confided to Abraham his impending destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Remarkably, Abraham questions, and thus argues, with God. Abraham asks if God will sweep away the innocent along with the guilty. If God can find 50, or 45, or 40, 30, or 20, even 10 innocent (presumably adult) residents, will God still destroy these cities? As others have pointed out, Abraham does not argue for justice on the basis of self-interest; he does not seek favored treatment for himself or his family. Therefore, he does not ask God to save his nephew Lot, or Lot's family, who lives in Sodom. Rather, Abraham appeals to God in the name of justice based on self-evident reason. God's justice must be understandable if it is to be persuasive and reassuring to human beings. Of course, God is awesome but God also must appear to be just if God's moral authority is to be accepted. Abraham thus asks: how can God be considered just if He would destroy two cities, killing the innocent along with the guilty? Abraham implies that God, by murdering everyone in the two cities, would be a participant in evildoing. Significantly, God does not verbally resolve the argument with Abraham. Rather, God reacts by acting and not in words. Furthermore, Abraham does not anticipate God's response. God destroys the two cities *and* saves its one innocent, just man and his family (as Thomas Pangle in *Political Philosophy and the God of Abraham* suggests, that

man is Lot, the only person in Sodom who had offered safety and hospitality to strangers). This solution simply had not occurred beforehand to Abraham. In the account of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham had doubted God's justice because it seemed unintelligible. God responded by acting, in the process reminding Abraham of His wisdom. God's justice can be beyond human understanding. Reason exercised in the service of discovering justice is an estimable human trait. However, unaided, it sometimes simply proves insufficient to understand God's ways and, ultimately, God's justice.

It is against this background that we are presented with the Akeda. The poignancy of the binding of Isaac grows directly out of what appears to be an irresolvable conflict. It would appear that Abraham is asked to choose between the love of God and the love of his son Isaac. How could such a choice be commanded by a just God? Consider only how long he and Sarah had waited for this son. And what a blessing Isaac's birth was. His birth was a miracle, a physiological absurdity so far-fetched that it had evoked his Mother's laughter. And now he was to be sacrificed, slaughtered at the hand of his Father? Such a test strains human capacity and our modern imaginations. Even an awe-inspiring promise by God to Abraham of future greatness through Isaac's line may have seemed now problematical. Yet, before adopting this viewpoint too hastily, we should remind ourselves that the Abraham who undertook the three day journey with Isaac, two servants and a donkey to Moriah was a person familiar with the seeming vagaries of

God's justice. Having not merely encountered God, but having argued with God, Abraham was uniquely situated to conclude that the ways of God were mysterious yet, nonetheless, wise. And as forceful as his original objection to God's justice had been before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah –that a just God would not punish the innocent along with the guilty – God's answer had proven original, compelling and persuasive. By both destroying Sodom and Gomorrah and by saving its one obviously innocent person – Lot -- God had demonstrated a wisdom that surmounted contradiction and therefore a wisdom that surpassed human logic. Would – could --this happen again? Now it appeared (again) that a love of God required the sacrifice, and the pain and suffering not merely of the innocent, but perhaps also of the righteous. But how could that be? As Abraham approached that fateful mountain, I do not doubt that he understood what God commanded, although he likely must also have reflected upon his limited capacity to understand the totality and subtlety of God's justice.

By then, Abraham's moral education, as outlined in Genesis, had come a long way. Furthermore, the human race's moral awareness had significantly evolved as well. Early in Genesis, God had called out Adam, the first man. After Adam had disobeyed God's injunction to avoid eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, God asks Adam: where are you (a-yeh-kah)? Of course, God knew where Adam was. But did Adam know where he was, spiritually and ethically? Adam's self-knowledge was nonexistent.

It is noteworthy that Adam did not answer God, avoiding all responsibility for his actions. Not surprisingly, he chose to blame the woman, Eve, for his own misconduct.

Adam's contrast with Abraham is striking. Abraham has already chosen a way of life, providing an answer to that most fundamental question that asks of how human beings should lead their lives. We see Abraham's choice illustrated at the very beginning of the Akeda, when God calls out to him. Unlike Adam, Abraham knows where he is and who he is. When first approached by God, and later on the mountain, Abraham answers resolutely. "Here I am" Abraham assertively answers God. Abraham has neither the desire nor the need to hide from God's justice. Rather he is a person prepared to embrace that justice, to live according to its precepts and dictates. Abraham accepts responsibility for his actions because he knows that God's justice is real and therefore his responsibility to act justly is real. Furthermore, Abraham also has learned that God's goodness does not require a complete suspension of human reasoning nor does it prohibit even the direct questioning of God and God's justice. To the contrary, Abraham has discovered the human mind can grasp the outlines of justice consistent with the Divine order. Abraham knew, as we know, that it is wrong to murder, wrong to commit acts of sexual violence, and wrong to treat the stranger with contempt and scorn. Aspects of God's morality are immediately accessible to us through reason. But Abraham has also learned another important lesson about God's justice. Even in those instances when God's actions or admonitions seem puzzling or confusing, and when

they appear beyond the human capacity to understand, human confusion does not invalidate the truth of God's justice nor necessarily render God's wisdom problematical. For it turns out that human reason is complimented and completed by an unwavering trust in God, which is the equivalent of having faith in God's justice. For that reason, the Akeda would seem to proffer that the perception and the perpetuation of God's justice constitutes God's ultimate blessing for human beings.

Abraham is the Bible's first just man. His life embodies Moses' later injunction to the Hebrew people, made just before they crossed into the land flowing with milk and honey, that they recognize that only God is God, and that each of the Hebrew peoples (and each of us as well) "shall love The Lord God with all our heart, with all our soul and with all our might." These words, reiterated by Jesus, remain not only an integral part of the Jewish religion; they have become a central part of Protestant traditions and of the Catholic faith as well. For Abraham, and for us, love of God cannot be divorced from the recognition of God's ultimate wisdom and justice.

By the end of Scripture's account of Abraham, we know at least three things for certain about him. First, in the most superficial sense, he is a typical human being; Genesis pictures Abraham as a man who faces daunting problems and challenges and tries to solve them to the best of his ability. Second, he is a man who is profoundly concerned with human justice, with justice in this world. Therefore, he attempts to secure fair treatment for all human beings. As we have seen, at key moments, Abraham

is fiercely determined that the innocent not be unfairly punished. Finally, and not unrelated, Abraham holds God in awe; he has come to love and trust God unconditionally. In this way, The Akeda teaches us that the love of justice and the love of God are not in tension, but are merely two sides of the same coin. Abraham's unequivocal love of God is complemented by a concern that the innocent not be unfairly punished and by a faith in a God who will not require him to do so. Abraham's previous encounter with God has given Abraham sound reason to believe that God will not require him at Moriah to commit an act of fundamental injustice. Furthermore, Abraham's faith in God's justice and wisdom will be vindicated by subsequent events. Precisely in this way, The Hebrew Scripture's account of the Akeda teaches that God's ways constitutes our well-being. God's justice, it would seem, is truly divine.

# MORNING WORSHIP

Friday, April 16, 2010

## Prelude

## Welcome/Announcements

## Opening Call to Worship Psalm 130: Read responsively by verse

L: Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.

**C: LORD, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!**

L: If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, LORD, who could stand?

**C: But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.**

L: I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;

**C: my soul waits for the LORD more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.**

L: O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem.

**C: It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.**

## Readings

Genesis 22: 1-19

## Message

Peter Schotten, Govt.

## Litany: read responsively

L: May we see the day when war and bloodshed cease when a great peace will embrace the whole world

**C: Then nation shall not threaten nation and humankind will not again know war.**

L: For all who live on earth shall realize we have not come into being to hate or destroy

**C: We have come into being to praise, to labor and to love.**

L: Compassionate God, bless all the leaders of all nations with the power of compassion. Fulfill the promise conveyed in Scripture:

"I will bring peace to the land, and you shall lie down and no one shall terrify you. I will rid the land of vicious beasts and it shall not be ravaged by war."

**C: Let love and justice flow like a mighty stream.**

L: Let peace fill the earth as the waters fill the sea.

## **Final Prayer:**

**All: Create in us a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within us. Do not cast us away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from us. Restore to us the joy of your salvation, and sustain in us a willing spirit.**

## **Postlude**

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### **CAMPUS MINISTRY ANNOUNCEMENTS**

**SENIOR SPEAKERS** - Anyone interested in giving a senior sermon next year, please see Pr. Ann or Carol in the chapel office.

#### CHAPEL SCHEDULE

Sunday, 18 <sup>th</sup>	Revive at 5! - Dave O'Hara, Reli
Monday, 19 <sup>th</sup>	Morning prayer, 10 am - Luke Lynass, '08
Wednesday, 21 <sup>st</sup>	Holy Communion, 10 am - Richard Swanson, Reli.
Friday, 23 <sup>rd</sup>	Morning worship, 10 am - Bob Wendland, Sr. Spkr.