

GEN 22, 1-19 - September 25th 2016

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

I wonder how this story of Abraham and Isaac made you feel when you heard it just now?

Did it make you feel angry or sad? Did you feel puzzled, because what Abraham does is beyond reason?

What did those of you, who have kids feel when you heard that a parent is commanded by God to kill his child?

What did we, who are all children of someone feel like, as we heard that a father is willing to put obeying God's cruel command above the love for his child?

I felt like I wanted to run away. If I was Isaac, I probably would have done exactly that: run away, try to forget everything about my family -and try to forget that I once believed in God.

But aside from the feelings of our hearts, I think this story is also hardly understandable for our brains. Abraham seems to be totally mad to obey God's command. I can't understand why he acts like he does. Why doesn't he argue with God, as he often did? Why doesn't he tell Sara, his wife, about Gods command? Why doesn't he remind God that "You shall not kill"?

I don't understand Isaac either, why does he go with his father? Why doesn't he defend himself, or run away?

But most of all, I don't understand God, even more than usually. Why does he want Abraham to kill his only son, the one that god himself promised him? Why is God demanding cruelty, not love?

Why is this terrible story even in the Bible? I think that most of us are not really sure what this story wants to show us. So let's take a look at it again, maybe in a slightly different way than usual:

The story is written without mentioning any emotions and hardly any words are spoken.

So I tried to imagine what the protagonists might have felt or thought.

I tried to rewrite this story. And I tried to fill in some of the blanks that I miss when I read the text of the Bible. So let's imagine what happened after God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac:

>>>STORY:

Early one morning, Abraham got up after a sleepless night. He went to the stable and saddled a donkey. Then he took his son Isaac, the one he loved, and said "goodbye" to Sara, his wife. He wished her Farewell as if he would never return from the upcoming journey. But Sara didn't understand.

"How will I ever dare to come back home?" This question had kept him up all night, but it wasn't the most daring question that tortured him. In the silence of his thoughts Abraham went on the journey with his son and two of his servants. Even though Abraham didn't know the destination of the journey he was desperately aware of how it would end.

Abraham looked at his son walking next to him. "What might he be thinking about?" - "His thoughts are surely purer than mine", Abraham supposed silently. He preferred to walk towards their fate in silence. "But fate is not the right word for it" suddenly this thought crossed Abrahams mind. Because it was not fate that Abraham was obeying, nor morals, but God alone. He would keep the faith.

Deeply caught in such thoughts, they had gone a good bit of the way. The sun set and they went to sleep. Before they lay down, Abraham gave some food to Isaac. For himself, he felt so miserable that he couldn't eat anything. Isaac worried about that. Maybe this journey wasn't a fun adventure after all?

But he didn't like – or dare - to ask, he just trusted his father.

During the next day, they walked many miles. Sometimes they competed in short races. Abraham observed the moves of his son, they were strong and dynamic. "He only would have to fight back" this thought dominated his mind. But Isaac didn't defend himself. He had realized that this journey was very serious. He only wished that his father would tell him something about it: Their destination, his intention, his love, his fear. All of that lingered in the air like dust settling onto their eyes and in between them.

Soon, both of them, Abraham and Isaac were covered with this dust of anxious expectation. And with every step it became heavier and more concrete. So they dragged on, with light steps and heavy thoughts. And although they felt like they would never arrive, they walked on.

The third day started with blazing sunlight, but none of the travelers saw it. Their sight was limited by the dust and they only saw the mountain their journey had led them to. Abraham told his servants to wait at the foot of the mountain. He didn't know what he would tell them, when he would return alone in only a few hours' time. How would he ever be able to justify himself for what he was about to do? But it was too late for thoughts like that, now. Too late. Abraham wished that time would stop and that it would be over at once. Oh, if only this could be the end of the world...

They began to climb the mountain. On their way, they collected dry pieces of wood. Abraham explained to Isaac that he wanted to sacrifice to the Lord on the mountaintop. But did he really want to?

Yes. Abraham wanted to obey God.

They walked on. Isaac looked calm to Abraham. "Will he be able to understand?" asked Abraham silently in his mind. "Will death or sacrifice be of greater importance to him? -to me?!" Thinking that, Abraham felt sick. Until now, he had avoided thinking about Isaac's death.

"Where is the lamb for the sacrifice?" Isaac asked. His question pulled Abraham back from his thoughts into reality. He stared at his son. But he hardly saw him. It seemed as if he had already started to vanish. The inescapable future without Isaac had already influenced the present. Abraham was paralyzed by this painful thought of losing his son. But Isaac understood in this instant what was about to happen. He took his father's hand and they walked on together, with firm steps.

The dust in their eyes stopped their tears before they could stream down their faces. Silently and dried out, Abraham built an altar, bound Isaac, his son, the one he loved, like a lamb for sacrifice and couldn't find words at all, to tell his son everything he had not said. Everything that wouldn't matter soon.

Like a sleepwalker, Abraham reaches out his hand against his son who he loves. And in slow-motion -as the knife slowly lowers to Isaacs throat- the Angel of the Lord appears and the ram. The sacrifice gets exchanged, fire burns and pleases the Lord. And they climb down from the mountain, arrive at the waiting servants and return home. But the words remain unsaid between father and son, and so does the dust stay on their eyes. And when both men greet Sara, she doesn't know about all this, because they keep it locked in their hearts. And it unites them. And it separates them.

>>>>END of story PAUSE<<<<<

This is not a case of "all is well, that ends well"! No, I think this story doesn't end well at all. But I also think, that the End of the story isn't the most important thing here. I mean, of course it is great that it ends as it does, because it shows, that God keeps his promises and doesn't take back the blessing he gave Abraham and his family. We, the audience, know that the whole thing was "only" a test. But that shouldn't make us take the story less seriously.

I'm convinced, what's really important here is in the course of the story:

What about this story is so hard to understand? Abraham gets a disturbing command from God, he shall sacrifice his son, the son of God's promise to have descendants as countless as the stars. To be the father of a blessed nation. Then – even less understandable – Abraham does as he is told, takes Isaac with him on this journey and is prepare to sacrifice him, which actually means that he has to kill his own son. But suddenly, in the last possible moment, God miraculously changes his mind and hinders Abraham from doing as he is told. And everybody returns home... [Everybody? No, when we look at the story in the Bible, it doesn't say that Isaac returns from the mountain. We are just so relieved that we think he must be coming home with his father. But maybe something happened to Isaac on this journey that made him go his own way? We don't know.]

However, I think even more peculiar than WHAT happens, is HOW it happens. Nearly everything in this story happens in absolute silence.

When Abraham and Isaac start their journey, he says nothing.

During three days of walking to the mountain, he says nothing.

When Isaac and Abraham start to climb the mountain, he says nothing. -It is Isaac, who addresses his father with a question that must have been on his tongue all the way: “where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Abraham answers, with almost prophetic words. And then the silence continues.

When they reach the top of the mountain, he says nothing.

When they prepare the altar and the fire, he says nothing.

When Isaac is bound and Abraham reaches out to him with the knife, he says nothing.

No single word or sound is made, when all we want to do is shout, argue and cry “Stop”. It almost feels like we are caught in a nightmare where we want to move and shout -but we can't. We are somehow unable to move or speak. The same here: as we struggle with the plot of this story, we become more and more desperate. We want words that explain. But there is only silence. We want somebody to speak into the silence. But nobody does. Why? What does the story want to show us with its silence?

The story shows an extreme situation, where silence seems to be the only option. Nobody in the story can explain what God commands. And God himself doesn't want to explain the command. This kind of silence is certainly very hard to bear. Let's just imagine what horrible worries Sara would have had, if she had known what Abraham was about to do to her son. Let's imagine how Isaac must have felt on the journey if he had about known his fathers' instruction. Let's imagine how maddening it would have been for Abraham to know Gods reasons for the command. How can anybody put such thoughts and feelings in words? How can words be better than silence in this case?

I guess all of us also have experienced a time when we've run out of words to explain a situation or our feelings. And most of us have surely been asked questions we couldn't answer. There are situations in life, when we don't know any more what we can say. For example, when someone close to us has died, and we don't know what we can say for comfort. Or a friend of ours cries, but there is just nothing to say to make them feel better. In such cases it's healing to be together, even without words. This is hidden for us in silence.

We can experience God in words, for example when we read the bible, sing hymns or pray. But we believe that God is also a God of silence who is reachable when we focus on our inner hopes and unspoken fears. We can't always be talking to or about God to keep him available. Still, God is also with us when we are silent. And maybe we have even more room for God in our silence. And, equally important, God is also God, when God is silent. No great noise or voice is necessary to prove this. God is there, in words and in silence.

We can learn from this story, that sometimes silence is the only option we have. Sometimes we can't smooth-talk. This is true for our lives, but also for our faith. There are questions we can't answer. There are things we don't understand. Life happens and we don't understand how it can ever be well again. We don't know all the answers when someone asks us a question about our faith. Knowing this is no weakness. Enduring silence can be hard and takes courage. Still, sometimes silence is the best option we have. Faith and hope and love don't have to make many words. They are also strong in silence. And God, whom we believe in and put our hope in, is not only God in noise and voice, but he is also God in the silence. Even when God doesn't seem to know what is happening, because we can't see, feel, hear, God is still God. And God is still there. Even in silence.

Let's have the courage to endure through the silence. Let's have the courage to listen to stories like these even when we can't understand. So let's learn from this story once more. Beyond the silence, it also tells us three times, that in this terrible silence, Abraham and Isaac walked on together. Even though it's not easy at all, the story says three times: "they went on together." They walked together and stayed together in this silence, when they couldn't say anything. They had no words, but still they did not lose or abandon each other in this silence. They went on together.

Being silent takes courage, but it is good to admit that we can't explain the universe and that words aren't the cure for everything. Sometimes, in our own lives, troubles, fears or hopes are left unsaid. We carry them in silence, when we walk together as friends, as a congregation, as a community. But even walking together in silence means that we don't walk alone.

Silently, we walk together, and God walks with us. Amen.