

faith, or an ideology. Sound familiar? Where can you think of this kind of rhetoric today?

- Another notes that one thing which is often overlooked in this story is that God's claims on us end at destroying another person. God's claims for us to sacrifice are for ourselves alone and not to make someone else suffer in order for us to prosper.
- Yet another outlines the probability that the place of Abraham's sacrifice was not as supposed on the modern temple mount but rather that the mount of sacrifice was in fact, just outside the city walls at Calvary. Thus, the parallel between Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his only son and God's willingness to sacrifice the only Son of God on the same mountain.
- And another still emphasizes the parallel between Isaac's carrying the wood and Jesus' words on the necessity for each disciple to "take up our cross and follow Jesus."

Confused yet? I certainly was – and am! I could add more but you get the point.

This text with all its mystery and compelling power has proven to be fertile ground for all kinds of artists. There are hardly any other scene from the Hebrew Scriptures



that have been more illuminated by visual artists than our scene today. We will be looking at a number of those over the course of this sermon.

Song writers in particular have abundant reference to this crazy story of Abraham and Isaac on Mt. Moriah. Bob Dylan's memorable first verse of "*Highway 61 Revisited*" puts this at the crossing of Highway 61 by Highway 49, a place of legend where Bluesman Robert Johnson is reputed to have sold his soul to the devil for the ability to play the guitar.



Other artists have picked up on this, as Robert Johnson and this crossroads are also important parts of the movie *Brother, Where Art Thou*.

As Dylan sees it:

Oh God said to Abraham, "Kill me a son"
Abe says, "Man, you must be puttin' me on"
God say, "No." Abe say, "What?"
God say, "You can do what you want Abe, but
The next time you see me comin' you better run"
Well Abe says, "Where do you want this killin' done?"
God says, "Out on Highway 61!"¹

Dylan truncates 'temptation' by the Devil into 'testing' of Abraham, but it nevertheless still a worthy effort. Leonard Cohen from the same era in music as Dylan also rises to catch the wild, untamed nature of God's demand. From his "*Song of Isaac*:"



The door it opened slowly,
my father he came in,
I was nine years old.
And he stood so tall above me,
his blue eyes they were shining
and his voice was very cold.
He said, "I've had a vision
and you know I'm strong and holy,
I must do what I've been told."
So he started up the mountain,
I was running, he was walking,
and his axe was made of gold.²

This text is clearly not for the faint-hearted. Nor is this one for the faint of faith. It challenges us beyond mere rationality, beyond reason. It challenges us beyond obedience and trust. Intuitively we

know this is sacred soil and dangerous ground. Like the burning bush, we had better tread carefully.

How are we to make sense of God ordering Abraham to offer Isaac, the child of the promise, as a child sacrifice? Does God break promises? Does God break God's own rules against human sacrifice? Is this God tempting Abraham with a foul pagan ritual? Is obedience more important than doing what is right and just? What does this mean for us as followers of Jesus on our walk today? Does it even effect our walk today?



One teacher of preachers advises: "Just let this story tell itself." The hearers "might feed for a month off that story. They might even start talking to each other about that story. Some of them may even call you and say... 'that story.'" ³ wow. All right, let's try that. Let's see how that would turn out.

Bishop Will Willimon of the United Methodist Church did just that. He tells about a time when serving a moderately affluent, white, suburban church in Durham NC and the effect just the straight telling of this story has on us. It all started quite innocently. Called at the last



minute to lead an intergenerational SS class, he grabs a video entitled "*Sacrifice of Isaac*" from a series aimed at just telling the Genesis story straight from Scripture. While he didn't have much time or choice, he thought, "What can happen? This is just a simple Bible story."⁴ "Right?"

After the video ended, there was stunned silence. Discussion was a non-starter. Willimon tried to fill up the empty air with words on top of words about the cultural background of ritual child sacrifice in the Ancient Near East. Still no response. Finally in near desperation, He asked:

“But what does this old story mean to us? I daresay we moderns are a bit put off by the primitive notion that anybody would think that God wanted [them] to sacrifice a child like this.”⁵

“God still does,” an older, gray-haired woman volunteered, looking anxious. [“What?” one wants to ask, “God still does?”] “How?”

Quietly with tears beginning to well up, she said:

“We sent our son to college. He got an engineering degree. But he got involved in his church, not a Methodist Church, a fundamentalist church. Then they had a baby, our only grandchild. Now he says God wants him to be a missionary and go to Lebanon. [Wants to] take our baby, too.”⁶

She can go no farther, beginning to heave and sob.

The silence was broken again by a middle-aged man. “I’ll tell you the meaning this story has for me. I’ve decided that I and my family are looking for another church.” “What?” Willimon asks and adds “Why?” [He doesn’t say it out loud but one must ask “Where in the world is all this coming from?” “What is in this text?”]

“Because when I look at that God, the God of Abraham, I feel I’m near a real God, not the sort of dignified, businesslike, Rotary club god we chatter about here on Sunday mornings. Abraham’s God could blow a man to bits, give and then take a child, ask for everything from a person and then want more. I want to know that God.”⁷

[Wow, all this from this seemingly simple text!?] A young woman is crying now. A woman next to her with her arm around her says, “Gloria wanted me to tell you that her husband left her and the two children last week. She wants us to pray for her.”

The other-worldly strangeness and mystery of our story is captured well in this artifact from Ur of the Chaldees 2500 BCE ~ pretty much contemporary with Abraham and Sarah. It is a gold and precious stones depiction of a ram caught in a thicket – a symbol in that time and culture of promise and prosperity. Could this be



a depiction of Abraham and Isaac's story?

This God of Abraham is indeed a strange and mysterious God who breaks into even the nice, comfortable, staid, orderly, middle class lives we have struggled hard to create in order to insulate ourselves from the ravages of sacrifice and costly faith. The God of Sarah and Abraham breaks into even middle-of-the-road, reasonable religion. The God of Moses and Mariam breaks into our real world and demands more than offerings, more than tithes, more even than obedience, more even than trust...

“ Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

[NO] God has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?” [Micah 6:7-8]

Even more?! More even than the trust and obedience of an Abraham, God desires justice, mercy and humility in our walk with the LORD.

We've sung this morning *“Trust and Obey.”* Remember? Have you already forgotten? We've sung *“I Surrender All.”* The artists do seem to get the point of this story right, perhaps better than we do. The angel who stays Abraham's hand explains to us that the point is about trusting God – our God who does provide for all our real needs and more – our God who is faithful to promises made and covenants struck. That is why Abraham named this place “the LORD will provide” that is, ‘YHWH jireh’ or as traditionally pronounced, ‘Jehovah jireh.’



This seemingly simple text has a mind-altering, life-altering power. If we let it seep into our hearts and souls

and let it work its way around our minds. Don't try and tie down its meaning – its meaning is much more than rational, more than heart-

tugging – it has to be absorbed intuitively – lived intentionally. And don't let it out until it has done its life transforming work.

¹ Bob Dylan, "*Highway 61 Revisited*" first verse

² Leonard Cohen, "*Song of Isaac*" first verse

³ quoting Fred Craddock, source unknown

⁴ *Pulpit Resource* for June 26, 2011, p. 58

⁵ *Ibid*

⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 58-59

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 59