

Sunday, June 29, 2014: Genesis 22:1-14

## Could Abraham know that God is testing him?

by [Heidi Haverkamp](#) in the [June 25, 2014](#) issue

For a few years now, I have been collecting ornaments for a Jesse Tree in our home. The Jesse Tree is an Advent version of a Christmas tree: a bare branch hung with an ornament for each day of Advent, each inspired by an Old Testament story. The readings begin with creation and end with the nativity.

You can buy a whole set of Jesse Tree ornaments—circles of paper or felt with a picture of a rainbow for Noah or a sheaf of wheat for Ruth. But ever since I found a perfect blue glass whale (for Jonah), I've been working to create my own set of three-dimensional ornaments. I'm finding, however, that while there are many strange things that have been made into Christmas ornaments, it's hard to find stuff appropriate for Old Testament themes like the Ten Commandments, the Ark of the Covenant, or a burning bush.

For the binding of Isaac, I went looking for a ram. There are lots and lots of sheep out there—fluffy coats, pink ears, many with long eyelashes and little smiles painted on their faces. But there are very few with both horns and a suitably blank expression for the *Akedah*. (I did find ornaments for the St. Louis Rams and the Dodge Ram pickup.)

Finally I found one. I cut an evergreen branch from our yard and wedged the ram into the “thicket.” I hung it on the tree on the eighth day of Advent, and I was happy.

But somehow our cat knocked the ornament down and our dog found it. My husband texted me a photo of the ram, torn limb from limb on our kitchen floor. While it did seem like an appropriate end for an animal meant to be a sacrifice, I couldn't believe that this thing I'd spent weeks searching for could be destroyed so quickly. So far, God has not provided a replacement.

Abraham, on the other hand, deliberately sets out to sacrifice the son he and Sarah spent so very many years wishing for. He gets up early. He finds the necessary wood for fuel. He takes two servants and a donkey and travels for three days. He straps the wood onto his son's back.

And he carefully responds to Isaac's innocent question “Where is the lamb?” with a calm, loaded answer: “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son.”

Many Christians connect this story with the death of Jesus—Abraham doesn't need to sacrifice Isaac because eventually, God will sacrifice his own son. That seems unfair; this is a Jewish story. But I struggle to find anything else meaningful here. Yes, God supplies the ram and Isaac is saved, but there's so much agony first. Self-sacrifice is valuable, but Abraham's humility puts his son's life on the altar, not his own. Evil actions have consequences, but God doesn't accuse Abraham or Isaac of doing anything wrong. It's important to protect the innocent and vulnerable, but while Abraham convinces God not to destroy Sodom (temporarily, anyway), he doesn't even argue with God for the life of his own son.

In the end, to my great discomfort, this seems to be a story about obedience. The word *obey* comes from the Latin *audire*, “to listen,” but it makes me think of dictatorships, of the servants on *Downton Abbey*, of Laura Ingalls Wilder telling Almanzo she cannot promise to obey in their marriages vows but must be allowed to

follow her own conscience. I associate none of these things with the God I have come to know in my life.

Then this year I became a Benedictine oblate. An oblate enters a relationship with a particular monastery, promising to live according to the sixth-century Rule of Benedict as a layperson in one's context outside the monastery. Obedience is a big part of the rule—obedience to God, to the abbot or abbess, and to the other monks or nuns. As an oblate, I don't have to vow to obey any other person. But studying the rule has made me think about obedience differently.

Obedience is about listening, I have discovered. What voices do we listen to in our lives? Where are our loyalties? What do we value? What or whom do we obey? I grew up in a family where I was encouraged to question everything. If I thought one way, my parents encouraged me to consider the opposing viewpoint. This was invaluable, but it often left me wondering how to determine what is right. I've had trouble deciding what in my life to obey.

Yet Abraham obeys God without questioning. In fact, they seem to have a long-standing relationship in which God asks Abraham for this harsh obedience. We trust those we've known a long time, especially when we've shared danger and risk. Abraham and God have been through a lot together: foreign countries, spousal mishaps, battle, circumcision, family fights, Sodom and Gomorrah, a son saved and then lost to exile. Abraham has learned to trust God, and to know God's ways.

Could he know that God is just testing him? Or has he simply learned to trust God's instructions? I wonder if obedience is related to relationship—if God desires not mindless obedience so much as trust.

Learning to trust in God is a long journey. Maybe that's why it's hard to find a ram ornament: we'd rather remember the joy of trusting in God instead of the sacrifices and difficulties of a relationship with the Holy One. I can pray that I won't face what Abraham did, but I know that the only path to trusting and knowing God is through enduring the hardships of this life with God alongside me.