

Questions our children ask (13A; Genesis 22:1-14)

Isaac has a voice.

by [Diane Roth](#)

June 26, 2020

To receive these posts by email each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

I was contemplating seminary at the time Alice Miller's book *The Untouched Key* was published. I haunted bookstores in those days. I do not know exactly what drew me to the book at first.

But I remember that near the beginning, Miller makes reference to Rembrandt's *The Sacrifice of Isaac*. She notices the details: how Abraham's hand covers Isaac's whole face, how the knife is pointed downward, how Abraham is looking not at his son but up toward the angel—who, at the last moment, is warning him to stop.

Miller traces our views of childhood trauma and abuse in part to a theology connected with images like these. She views Abraham's absolute obedience to God as a stain we cannot erase, no matter how hard we try.

I carried her questions through seminary, wondering what kind of God requires Abraham to sacrifice his son—or at least to be willing to. What kind of God is pleased by unquestioning obedience?

I'm not sure my questions were ever really satisfactorily answered. I have read commentaries that attempt to justify the test. Isaac is a sign that God has kept his promise. To be willing to sacrifice Isaac is to trust that the God who kept his promise can do it again.

Or this: Abraham cannot love anything, even Isaac, more than he loves God.

But such explanations make Isaac into an abstraction rather than a person, a child.

These days I am comforted by small details in the story itself. I notice that when God calls Abraham, he answers, “here I am,” and when Isaac calls out to his father, he answers his son the same way. Abraham attends to the voice of his son. And I am comforted by the fact that Isaac *has* a voice. He speaks. He asks a question: “Where is the lamb for the burnt offering, father?”

Isaac asks a question, and the answer turns out to be the key, the resolution—salvation, even.

Our children ask questions too. They ask about climate change, about gun violence, about what kind of future we are leaving them. They ask about the salvation of our lives, of our souls. They ask painful, revealing questions.

How will we answer? And what will our answers reveal?

At the end of Genesis 22, God does not require Abraham to sacrifice his son. It is a relief: God does not require human sacrifice. But for us, the questions linger—as they should. They should not be put to rest by simply comparing Isaac to Jesus and pointing to the cross.

How are we attending to the questions of our children? Each of their questions sharpens the knife that is in our hands. Will we silence their questions, their voices? Where is the angel to stay our hand now?