

Stanford Memorial Church
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WHEN NOTHING ELSE MATTERS
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The story of Abraham being called by God to sacrifice his son Isaac is arguably one of the great foundational stories of religious literature. Masters of the art world, artists such as Caravaggio and Rembrandt, have produced masterpieces on the subject. It is a story which addresses a basic question of life: viz., what to do when nothing else matters? It's a question each one of us encounters in our life—usually several times. Of all the possible tragedies of human existence, none is quite as painfully overwhelming as a parent experiencing the death of his or her child—the prospect which Abraham confronted.

Regardless of how it happens, however, whether a cancer that could not be cured, a fatal traffic accident, a victim of neighborhood violence, or even an unexpected sports fatality. When the tragedy hits it becomes a time *when nothing else matters*. Nor does it make a significant difference if the parents are more advanced in age. I have an 85 year-old colleague whose 59 year-old son suddenly, without any forewarning, died of a fatal coronary attack. It is a pain which cannot be avoided because it seems to violate a basic law of existence: the old are supposed to die before the young. That is the natural progression of things. But when the young die first it is as if the flow of life has been reversed. It isn't right; it doesn't seem fair; it is excruciatingly painful; and it does not make sense.

The universal theme of when nothing else matters permeates the story of Abraham and Isaac. For decades Abraham and his wife, Sarah, had been trying to have a child, but it was not to be. The years passed by, and it became increasingly evident that they were becoming too old to have children. In desperation Sarah suggested to Abraham that he try to have a child with her maid, Hagar. He did, and a son was born whom they named Ishmael. But it was a short-lived celebration for Sarah. As Hagar began to feel the birth of her son elevated her importance in the family, Sarah found herself increasingly resentful, regretting she had ever made the suggestion to Abraham. And Abraham found himself caught in the middle. Fortunately, for Sarah and Abraham, the stress was greatly alleviated when Sarah gave birth to a son they named Isaac. Sarah and Abraham's dream had come true, and of course Isaac became the joy of their life. This picture of domestic bliss, however, was in danger of being destroyed when God decided to test Abraham, and said to him "(Abraham) take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you" (Genesis22.2).

Just when Abraham thought his dream had come true, he experienced the searing pain of what it is like when nothing else matters. What else could possibly matter if he lost his son? The death of Isaac would be totally devastating to both Abraham and Sarah.

Somehow, in spite of the disappointment and pain, Abraham, clinging to his faith by his fingertips, set out the next morning with his son Isaac, two servants, and the necessary wood for a burnt offering. In the course of the dreadful three-day trip across the desert a good many misgivings must have passed through the father's mind. "Why would God make such a dreadful request, especially after giving Sarah and me the child we had prayed for and dreamt about for years? . . . Maybe I should have tried to bargain with God . . . I could have said, 'What about sacrificing my other son Ishmael instead?'"

Regardless of his misgivings, Abraham persevered in faith. When they finally reached the mountain where the sacrifice was to take place, Abraham said to his two young men, “Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you” (22.5). It was bad enough to contemplate having to kill his beloved son without having his servants witness it as well. Perhaps there was even a thin sliver of hope hanging on when he said to the two servants, “we will come back to you.” At any rate, he “took the wood for the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife” (22.6). As they trudged up the mountain, Isaac was a bit puzzled, and he said to Abraham, “Father . . . the fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering” (22.7)? These words had to cut Abraham to the core, yet he managed to hold on to a shred of faith and responded to his son, saying “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son” (22.8). And they continued walking in foreboding silence, a somewhat puzzled young man and his distraught, pain-filled father. When they finally reached the summit, “Abraham built an altar . . . and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son” (22.9,10). We can hardly imagine the tension of this moment: Abraham filled with anguish and his hand shaking while Isaac had to be totally terrified, teetering on the edge of total shock. Miraculously, at the last possible minute, the voice of an angel intercedes, “Abraham, do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me”(22,12). Not only is a terrible and tragic death averted, but Abraham looks up and sees a ram caught in the thicket by his horns, and this enables him to complete the sacrifice.

From our twenty-first century perspective, we are astounded by the fact that Abraham would go so far as to sacrifice his son. But in the biblical context, the truly remarkable miracle is that God would intervene to save Isaac and to bless Abraham for his faithfulness. In Abraham’s time and for centuries after, the killing and sacrificing of children, especially to appease a deity, was not that uncommon. In addition, infant mortality was a way of life, as more children tended to die than to survive. Herod had no reservations about killing the Jewish children two years of age and younger in order to prevent a promised savior from being born. We are informed Cleopatra had some of her young relatives killed to secure her power. The Mayans regularly sacrificed young men and women to the gods. And many a king who came to the throne by the death of his brother, had no compunctions about killing his nephews in order to secure his power.

What makes this story truly remarkable, in addition to emphasizing God’s love and compassion, is the fact that it serves as the foundational or formative myth for three of the great world’s religions, each of which claims Abraham as their founder. The story as we have looked at it so far is pretty much from the Jewish perspective. When Christianity came into existence some centuries later they were adamant in identifying Abraham as their founder. The very first verse of Matthew, the first of the four gospels declares it is giving “An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matt. 1.1). The relationship between God the father and Jesus the son is a fundamental theme throughout the New Testament. Like Abraham, God offers his son up to death, a painful death on the cross, executed by the Roman soldiers. But God’s intervention defies all expectation. No, God does not prevent the agonizing death of Jesus on the cross. Rather, in the resurrection God triumphs over the ultimate and most frightening enemy of all—death itself. The messiah has come in Jesus the Christ; death does not have the last word; and we can live in this faith and hope. This is the basic message Christianity has proclaimed for two millennia now.

Then, approximately five centuries after Christianity was founded, a third great religion, Islam, emerged and it also claimed Abraham as their founder. In contrast to the account common to Judaism

and Christianity, however, the Qur'an provides a slightly modified version of the story of Abraham. The son that Abraham is asked to sacrifice is not Isaac but Ishmael. All Muslims believe that their faith descended through Ishmael, who was fully accepted by Abraham as his son, while Judaism and Christianity claim to be the descendants of Isaac. Moreover, the Islamic version leads to the realization that when God gave the order to Abraham to sacrifice his son, there were in fact two adults—Abraham and Ishmael—whose faith was being tested. Thus, for Ishmael, there was no ambiguity or puzzlement over what God was requesting. It may well have been a more alarming request for him than for his father. He was a young man; he had his whole life ahead of him; but now it was being extinguished on the threshold of his adulthood. And if in fact his life should come to an end, Abraham still had his other son, Isaac, to carry on his lineage. For Abraham, Ishmael's readiness to accept his father's order clearly showed that his son was as devoted to God as he was.

In the centuries following the story of Abraham and his example as the ultimate model of faith in God, Muslims would declare that the event on Mt. Moriah took place on the mountain in Mecca, located in Saudi Arabia. And every Muslim is expected, as a basic act of faith, to join at least one annual pilgrimage or Hajj, to Mecca, if their health and resources permit. At the conclusion of Hajj season, every Muslim throughout the world will observe the Islamic holy day Eid al-Adha, to celebrate the memory of Abraham's bravery and faith and, even more, to proclaim the intervention of God's loving grace. For the Jews, Mt. Moriah was identified as the mount in Jerusalem on which Solomon's magnificent temple was erected. Christians have an alternative interpretation, believing that Calvary, where Jesus was crucified, was on a section of Mt. Moriah, near the temple mount in Jerusalem.

The fact that we have three variations of the same foundational religious epic, could present us with something of a dilemma. We could, if we wished, devote considerable time and effort to trying to determine which version is in fact the correct one. This strikes me, however, as something of an exercise in futility, given the number of manuscripts produced over the centuries and the many factors to be raised in determining their veracity. More importantly what is the point, since it feels a bit like majoring in minors, as the fundamental message of all three versions is the same. That message is: when we are confronted with a dire situation in which nothing else matters, somehow God's grace and compassion is able to break through. God the great doer of the unexpected. That transforming message of hope is as relevant and comforting today as it was in an ancient time when it became the ultimate, transforming experience in the life of Abraham and his son—and cascaded down the centuries in the formation of three of the world's three greatest religions.

This fundamental, existential theme of *When Nothing Else Matters* becomes increasing commonplace in our modern medical centers. Health-wise, the marvels of modern medicine have truly transformed our lives. We live longer, many traditional surgeries which once required days and sometimes weeks of hospitalization are now done on an outpatient basis, and the average length of stay in the hospital has been reduced significantly. As the result of these many advances, the environment of major university hospital, such as Stanford, has changed considerably. Physicians and administrators frequently describe the change by saying, "Our hospitals are becoming more like expanded intensive care units." Fortunately, the great majority of the patients are discharged in improved health. But there are also increasing instances, especially with older adult patients, of having to confront the wrenching question of whether or not to initiate, or continue, artificial life support systems. Truly it is a wrenching time, for everyone involved, when nothing else matters. God's compassionate grace and care in such situations is often difficult discern. But it may become evident in a variety of ways. Perhaps two family members who have been estranged experience a time of forgiveness and reconciliation. Or maybe a family member who has been exiled, living as the family black sheep, seeks forgiveness and becomes

accepted. One of my chaplain colleagues, Father John Hester, will often have the critically ill patient and the spouse renew their marriage vows, which is a common Roman Catholic tradition. When the entire family assembles around the patient's bed for such a service a remarkable transformation almost invariably takes place. Many petty differences are dispelled as insignificant. And the painful, pending loss of a loved one becomes a bit more acceptable, as the continuing sustaining power of God and family love is experienced by each of the members

At times such as this, struggling to understand and provide guidance to those, enduring a painful time when nothing else matters, I am reminded of a deeply insightful phrase that Jane Stanford had carved beneath the lectern here in Memorial Church: "For it is by suffering that God has most nearly approached to (us); it is by suffering that (we) draw most nearly to God." Amen