

Text: Genesis 22: 1-14  
Title: An Inscrutable God  
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*The Road* by Cormac McCarthy is a haunting journey across a post-apocalyptic wasteland. A cataclysmic event has left the earth covered in ash and devoid of most life. A father and son travel across this harsh hellish landscape. They forage for food, they hide from marauding bands of cannibals, they search for some reason to live and to hope.

The dark despair and deep longing that McCarthy captures in this Pulitzer Prize winning novel is overwhelming. A good deal of the book explores the emotional experience of the father ~ who knows he's dying. This scene sets the stage for the first words that are spoken in *The Road*.

*When it was light enough to use the binoculars, he glassed the valley below. Everything paling away into the murk. The soft ash blowing in loose swirls over the blacktop. He studied what he could see. The segments of road down there among dead trees. Looking for anything of color. Any movement. Any trace of standing smoke. He lowered the glasses and pulled down the cotton mask from his face and wiped his nose on the back of his wrist and then glassed the country again. Then he just sat there holding the binoculars and watching the ashen daylight congeal over the land. He knew that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God, God never spoke.*

If he is not the word of God, God never spoke.

Dear friends....

Isaac is the word of God to Abraham.  
Isaac is God's warrant.

Maybe you remember the story. Against all odds God picks out Abraham and Sarah and promises that he will make of them a great nation. While Sarah is still barren, she and Abraham conspire to take matters into their own hands, he sleeps with Hagar, the Egyptian servant girl, and she gives birth to Ishmael. Eventually, God doubles down on his promise and in her hundreds Sarah gives birth to Isaac.

God promised and God provided.  
Isaac is God's warrant.

And now, God is asking Abraham to sacrifice Isaac?  
Now God is asking Abraham to revoke his warrant?  
Now God is asking Abraham to kill his only son ~ the one whom he loves?  
What kind of father would do such a thing?  
What kind of God would ask such a thing?  
If he is not the word of God, God never spoke.

The word of God to Abraham was that he would be a great nation, and all the nations would be blessed through him. Isaac was the first installment on that promise. But, the command of God was that Isaac be killed....

Biblical Hebrew has five words for sacrifice; none are used here. The word here is slaughter or slay. There is no mistaking. And, we belittle the text if we make of it a God who tests and tinkers in jest. We best take God at his word here.

So, therefore, in the words of John Calvin:

*The command and the promise of God are in conflict.*

Luther calls it a “contradiction.”

I think one of the reasons why this story is so repugnant is that we live in a culture where happiness ~ our happiness, our children’s happiness ~ is the highest good. I can’t tell you how many times conversations about my daughter’s wedding ends with some form of, “Well, all that matters is that they’re happy.”

And I surely don’t disagree or want anything different, but there is no way to make sense of this story when our first priority is our children’s happiness. This story must get at some other grounding,  
some other priority,  
some other truth....

Listen to the angle that Calvin carves out here. He writes that the real anguish is not the death of a son but the death of faith. In his words:

*It was sad for him to be deprived of his only son, sadder still that this son should be torn away by a violent death, and by far the most grievous that he himself should be appointed as the executioner to slay him with his own hand....*

*But all these things, if we compare them with the spiritual conflict of conscience which he endured, will appear like the mere play, or shadows of conflicts.*

*For the great source of grief to him was not his own bereavement, not that he was commanded to slay his only heir.... but that, in the person of this son, the whole salvation of the world seemed to be extinguished and to perish....*

*For God...requires the death of the boy, to whose person He himself had annexed the hope of eternal salvation. So that this latter command was, in a certain sense, the destruction of faith.*

Faith over life?

An inscrutable God.

The promise and the command of God conflict, collide, contradict, confound.

Let's stop here for a moment.

Contemporary readings of this story see it as the dismantling of a system of sacrifice. In the development of religion, humanity hung its hopes on idols and amulets and sacrifices (even human sacrifices) to appease the gods. A flood could wipe-out a village, a drought could kill the weak, a season of sun and gentle rain could mean prosperity. So, people developed religious practices meant to appeal to the gods behind creation's power. This story turns that practice on its head.

This God doesn't need appeasement, rather this God provides.

This God doesn't take, this God gives.

This God doesn't require sacrifice; this God calls forth faith.

Is that good enough?

The whole thing is a dramatization about a new way of understanding God?

When Abraham sees Mount Moriah in the distance, he grabs a torch and a knife and straps the wood to Isaac's shoulders. Then, just as they are about to leave, he turns to his servants and says:

*Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.*

The pronouns are plural. Either Abraham is in on the dramatization and expects to come back with Isaac, or he doesn't want to blow his cover. My guess is that Abraham expects that he'll return with his son. Abraham believes that God will provide. Why would God promise one thing and then command another? Why would God revoke his warrant?

A few years ago, Ted Boswell was in a good deal of back pain, his balance and his gait were compromised, and he needed spinal cord surgery. When I saw him in recovery, he knew that the surgery had only been marginally successful and he was wondering what would come next. We talked, told stories, laughed, commiserated, and prayed. As I turned to go Ted said, "Rog, the night before surgery I read this beautiful prayer by Thomas à Kempis, from the 1400s. Six hundred years ago. Let me see if I can remember it." And, flat on his back, he said:

*O Lord, you know what is best for us, let this or that be done, as you please. Give what you will, and how much you will, and when you will. Deal with me as you think good, and as best pleases you. Set me where you will, and deal with me in all things just as you will. For, I am your servant, prepared for all things; for I desire not to live unto myself, but unto you; and Oh, that I could do it worthily and perfectly! Amen.*

Ted's eyes lit up with a measure of peace. It was a deep, hard won peace, recognizing that our confidence is not in our strength, or our service, or our sacrifice, but our confidence is in God. For, come what may, God will provide.

At the end of the story Abraham names the place: *Yahweh-yireh* "The Lord provides." He doesn't name it: *Abraham-shama* "Abraham obeyed." For finally, this story is not about Abraham's faith being tested and being found faithful, but it is about God, even an inscrutable God, being found faithful.

Everything is stripped away on Mount Moriah.

There's no hope in human agency. There's no confidence in fertility. There's no making things right. There's no piety that changes the deal. There's little light or hope. The death of Isaac nullifies the promise....

And, dear friends, in this ash strewn world we all face moments when everything is stripped away. The shadow of a knife will hang over our heads. We will be bound up in brokenness. We will be flat on our backs. Our life with God may conflict and confound, but....

But the promise of God finally led God,  
in deep anguish of soul,  
to hoist the wood of sacrifice on his son's shoulders,  
and climb that rugged mountain....

An inscrutable God promised and provided.

Jesus Christ is both son and ram in the thicket.

If he is not the word of God, God never spoke.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.