

Sermon HIW 2007-03-18: Gen 22,1-13

The grace of our LORD Jesus Christ, the Love of God and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

Dear congregation,

At times it is very difficult to talk about God. When people have to suffer without any reason. When God does something which we do not understand. When he seems to contradict himself. When there is no simple solution to a situation or problem.

Scripture is full of stories about God and about people. Many varied stories – pleasant and happy stories. But there are also the others, the difficult accounts. The one I chose as text for today's sermon is such a story. A story of the Old Testament, which has been read to us: Abraham is asked to sacrifice his own son. A story that accompanies and follows us, a story not easily digested.

What kind of God is that, who expects something like that?

What kind of human being is Abraham, who listens to such a command?

God had promised Abraham that he would make him into a great nation. At that stage Abraham had not had a child yet although he was 75 years old. And then, when he turned 100 Isaac was born at last, the son he had with his wife Sarah. And now Abraham is told to offer him as a sacrifice?

What kind of God is that who promises Abraham a son only to take him again the following moment? All the promises do come to naught!

And why does Abraham say nothing except: "*Here I am*"?

Where is his fighting spirit with which he had approached God, when he wanted him to spare Sodom? (Gen 18,16-33) There might still be 50 just people, and they cannot be punished alongside the others, said Abraham. And God answered: Good, if I find 50 just people I will spare the whole city. And Abraham addresses him again – maybe there were only 40, what then? If there be only 40, the city will be spared, is God's response.

The struggle did not end until Abraham had bargained his way down to 10 people.

And this shows: you can *talk* to God. God can even change his mind. Why does Abraham not try the same strategy here? Why does he not bargain with God? Why does he not imply every tactic and struggle to save his own son?

Maybe he did – so in between the lines.

Let's have a look at the text:

When Isaac asks his father about the lamb for the offering, Abraham merely says: *God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.* (vs 8)

Mostly the *faithfulness* of Abraham is underlined by this story: Abraham would follow God's order and sacrifice his own son.

But maybe the *faithfulness* of Abraham is to be found in *that*, that he carries on trusting God, that God fulfills his promises. That Abraham firmly believes, that God will *not* allow his only son to be taken from him at that specific stage.

God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering. Abraham says towards his son.

Our story, also known as the „sacrifice of Isaac“, specifically does *not* end with the sacrifice.

God stumbles over his own words.

The angel of the LORD calls out to him from heaven: Abraham! Do not lay a hand on the boy! Do not do anything to him. (vs 11 – 12)

Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. (vs 13)

God does not want humans to be sacrificed!

But why does he not say so immediately? Why this gruesome story?

We do not know why.

But don't we sometimes experience it ourselves? The difficult path. The roundabout way. The search for what God really has in mind. The dangers in life. Life so fragile.

The text does not provide an answer why God took *this* road with Abraham.

But in the end it is clear:

God does not want human life to be sacrificed. God does not want any human life to be sacrificed for anything in this world.

Maybe the time has arrived that we show our faithfulness towards God in that we finally see to it that human beings no longer be victims.

A modern fairytale:

There was once a king in a big country. On a certain day someone came to the king and said: I can build a machine that will transport you very fast from place to place. Are you interested in it?

The king replied: That sounds fantastic, what would you charge for such a machine? The man answered: You must give me 50 children a year from your people.

I am sure that if we were the king, we would in all probability have said: How do you dare to ask something like that!

But the people decided to take the machine, the car – and we know how many people loose their lives in road accidents.

Victims of civilization? Sacrificed for our progress?

And the angel of the LORD calls out to him from heaven: Do not lay a hand on the boy!

We most probably could think up a number of such stories. Stories showing us how humans are being sacrificed as sacrifices God does *not* want to have.

God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, Abraham says to his son.

We are in the season of Lent and the lenten hymns say it frequently that Christ was sacrificed for us and in our stead.

Christ is often depicted as the lamb.

Did God then do to Christ what Abraham was not allowed to do to his son Isaac?

Lamb of God, slaughtered on the cross?

I must admit, words like this do not flow readily from my lips. It is harsh and brutal language. Does God need such a sacrifice? Was Jesus sacrificed for the sake of our sins?

It seems to be an archaic concept, that God needs sacrifices. And we also find this way of thinking in the Bible e.g. in the letter to the Hebrews. But with one difference – it is God himself who brings this sacrifice. He gives his own body and blood. He gives himself as an offering to himself so that the power of evil forfeit its power over us.

The angel of the LORD calls out to him from heaven: Abraham! Do not lay a hand on the boy!

Jesus found during his lifetime his place at the side of the victims of society so that they can be set free from their role as victims.

Following this path, Jesus gave his whole life over to the will of God.

Jesus was not a victim in God's hands. Jesus died because of the cruelty and brutality of human actions. Jesus gave his life as a sacrifice, not because God needed it, but because the world needs it – we need it!

When we speak about the life and death of Jesus as sacrifice then not because God was in need of such a sacrifice, but rather because Jesus gave himself over to an uncompromising love.

The sacrifice Jesus brings is a voluntary self-offering. This “sacrifice” is acknowledged by God – but: he does *not accept* it. God does not need any sacrifice. God gives Jesus his life back. The resurrection makes this very clear: God does not want this sacrifice.

With that we already venture a step further beyond the season of lent towards Easter.

The angel of the LORD calls out to him from heaven: Abraham! Do not lay a hand on the boy!

God remains true to his promises. He is a God of life.
Amen.

And the peace of God that surpasses all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Pastor Anja Niehoff