

Last week's reading from the Hebrew Scriptures was the story of the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22:1-14) and listening to it, I realised there were some things that need being named: the abuse and trauma that Isaac would have experienced as a result of Abraham being willing to sacrifice him. After the service, I had several conversations with members of the congregation as well as with other Uniting Church ministers about this passage.

In my preparation for the next week's service (and the story of the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah) I came across some midrash that reflected on these two stories as a whole. Midrash is the ancient Jewish interpretation technique that seeks to make the stories come alive for each new generation.

Instead of writing my own sermon, I read an abridged version of the chapter. The chapter as a whole is reproduced here, with the reference. I commend the book as a whole for your reading and reflection.

Sasso, S. E. What if the angels should come too late? Chapter in *Midrash: Reading the Bible with question marks*. Paraclete Press: Brewster, p. 83-93. Abridged

What if the angels should come too late?

Getting on with it, when you can't get over it.

One of the most difficult stories in the Bible is the binding of Isaac. What kind of God would ask a father to take his beloved son up a mountain to sacrifice him? What kind of God would wait until the very last moment to intervene, restrain the father's hand, and release the son, Isaac, who was trembling beneath the knife? The rabbis turn the story's focus from God to Isaac. They identify with Isaac because his experience most resembles their own. They wonder aloud about those many Isaacs who did not survive and about how those who escaped the knife could go on.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, the renowned twentieth-century philosopher and rabbi, remembered being taught the story of Isaac's binding when he was a child. Upon hearing the angel tell Abraham not to lay a hand upon Isaac, Heschel began to weep. Despite his teachers' reassurance that Isaac was saved, the young Heschel was not consoled. He asked, "But rabbi, supposing the angel had come a second too late?" The rabbi explained that an angel can never come late, but Heschel concluded, "An angel cannot be late, but man, made of flesh and blood, may be."

In the following midrashim, the rabbis address us at our most vulnerable, when we fear that no one will come to rescue us. They ask us to imagine how we can face our greatest fears and not be defeated by them.

THE MIDRASH

Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and put it on his son Isaac. He himself took the firestone and the knife; and the two walked off together (Genesis 22:6)

Abraham then returned to his servants, and they departed together for Beersheva; and Abraham stayed in Beersheeva (Genesis 22:19).

And Isaac, where was he? Rabbi Berekia said: ... He sent him to Shem to study Torah, and there he remained for three years. And Isaac, where was he? Rabbi Yose ben Haninah replied: He sent him home in the night, for fear of the Evil Eye.

(Genesis Rabbah 56:11)

An Isaac, where was he? The Holy One, the blessed One, brought him into the Garden of Eden, and there he stayed for three years.

(Midrash Hagadol on Genesis 22:19)

And Isaac, where was he? The angels bore him to Paradise, where he tarried three years, to be healed from the wound inflicted upon him by Abraham on the occasion of the Akedah [the binding of Isaac].

(Abarbanel on Genesis 22:19)

Abraham and Isaac walked up Mount Moriah together. But at the conclusion of the traumatic encounter on the mountain, Abraham returned to Beersheba with only his servants. Isaac was not with him. Where was Isaac? For three years Isaac is absent from the biblical narrative, until he marries Rebecca. The rabbis question what happened to Isaac during that time, and they offer different responses.

Something extraordinary happened on the mountain. Abraham tied his son to the alter and stood above him with a knife in his hand. One midrash imagines that as Abraham stretched forth his hand, he wept, and his tears fell into Isaac's eyes. Isaac was saved at last moment, but the shock of the ordeal had to have altered him and his understanding of the world. What if the angel had come too late? How could Isaac have once again taken his father's hand, which had held the sacrificial knife, as he had done on the journey up the mountain? How could he continue to trust his father, or anyone else? Where could he find the faith to go on?

Because we do not encounter Isaac again until he marries Rebecca, all the midrashim assume that it took him three years to repair the damage to his soul. For Rabbi Berekiah, study of Torah was the answer to Isaac's despair. Of course at the time of the Genesis narrative there was as yet no Torah, but the midrash has no problem telescoping the years and reading back into the text a later time when Torah study was seen as an antidote to many ills. Rabbi Berekiah sees in the study of the Torah a way of countering the desolation of his own generation. Just as Isaac faced imminent danger, so did the Jews living in the rabbi's time. If Torah study could enable Isaac to continue, then surely Torah was an antidote to the hopelessness of his own days.

Rabbi Yose ben Haninah suggests that Abraham sent Isaac home under cover of dark before he returned with his servants. Abraham feared that people would look upon Isaac differently because of his narrow escape from death. Perhaps he believed that Isaac's last minute reprieve would make

him vulnerable to misfortune. According to popular superstition, publicising good luck might only tempt the forces of evil.

The first selections, which address the question of what happened to Isaac, are from Genesis Rabbah, a collection of midrashim on the book of Genesis edited in the fifth and sixth centuries. The third text, which suggests that Isaac spent three years in the Garden of Eden or Paradise, is from Midrash Hagadol, a thirteenth century collection of midrashim. Isaac Abrabanel, who provides the striking statement that Isaac was actually wounded by his father, was a well-known statesman, philosopher, and biblical commentator. He wrote at the time of the Jewish expulsion from Spain.

Both Midrash Hagadol and Abrabanel reflect the history of their own period. Having experienced the nightmare of the Crusades and after the devastation caused by the Inquisition and the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and Portugal, the writers see their people's persecutions mirrors in the binding of Isaac. As Isaac was bound to the alter ready to be sacrificed, so they were bound by outside forces and were prepared, like their ancestor the patriarch Isaac, to sacrifice their lives for their faith.

But for Jews in the Middle Ages, something was different. They often were not saved from death. No one intervened at the last moment to withhold the knife. The angel did come too late. There were thousands of Isaacs in those centuries, but they were all sacrificed.

A contemporary poem written by Hillel Bavli tells the story of a group of young Jewish women in Warsaw who, about to be raped by Nazi soldiers, chose martyrdom over defilement. They saw themselves as modern Isaacs.

Abraham responded to God's command to sacrifice Isaac by saying, "Here I am." So the poet imagines the women praying to the matriarch Sarah: "Here we are. We have met the test of Isaac's binding."

The Bible clearly tells us that Abraham did not raise his hand against Isaac, but the experience of the Jewish people reflects a different outcome. That may be while Abrabanel states that Isaac was mortally wounded and taken to Paradise, where the angels healed him. Perhaps those words reflect not only the dark reality of the age in which they were written, but also the hopes and the promise that all the Jewish martyrs will be healed and that, like Isaac, the people of Israel will survive.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

The reading prescribed for the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, is Genesis 22, the story of Abraham and Isaac. Every year it's the same story. In Hebrew we call it the Akedah, which means binding. Abraham walks Isaac up the mountain and prepares to sacrifice him, believing he is obeying God's command. Only at the last moment is Isaac saved and a ram sacrificed in his place. Every year the same story, but each year it somehow acquires a different meaning as we hear it anew, refracted through the lens of our personal experiences.

So often we focus on Abraham. What was he thinking when he heard what he believed was God's call to sacrifice his beloved son? Why didn't he challenge God as he did when God announced that Sodom and Gomorrah would be destroyed? Why didn't he talk to Sarah or even to Isaac about what he planned to do?

Sometimes we do not feel all that in control of our world. We do not identify with Abraham, so full of trust, so certain that he knows just what to do. We feel more like Isaac – vulnerable and apprehensive, propelled by forces beyond our control, going about our daily tasks filled with doubts, living with a knife hanging over our heads, never knowing if there will be a reprieve. At times we are all Isaac, uncertain of the future and afraid.

I often wonder how Isaac managed to get up after being tied down. How did he succeed in living when he had come so close to death, when all that he believed had been altered? He was able to walk up the mountain because he had faith. He went with his father in whom he had trusted, confident that his people would be as many as the grains of sand and the lights of the stars. But he walked down the mountain alone. Going up the mountain, he held his father's hand. What did he hold coming down? In what and in whom could he still believe?

The first thing that Isaac learned was that his mother, Sarah, had died. Surely his faith in a benevolent universe was shaken; he could never again be fully comforted by promises, divine or otherwise. On their journey up the mountain, Abraham had told Isaac that everything would be all right. No one would ever be able to tell him that again. The rabbis refer to Isaac's God as *Pachad Yitzchak*, the Fear of Isaac.

After the traumatic encounter on the mountain, the rabbis ask, "And Isaac, where was he?" they answer, "The Holy One brought him into the Garden of Eden and he stayed three years." What was he doing all that time in Paradise? The midrash tells us, "The angels were healing him."

So many times when we confront difficulties, when we are hurt or face loss, people tell us we will get over it, everything will be okay. But I don't imagine that Isaac ever got over it; rather, the angels taught him how to heal, how to get on with it.

The name of Isaac's God means "fear," but Isaac's name means "laughter." I don't think he was given this name only because Abraham and Sarah laughed when they heard they would have a son in their old age. I think that Isaac laughed too. The angels taught him to laugh in the face of the unknown and wrestle joy out of despair.

How do we get on with it when we can't get over it, find hope and wrestle joy when, like Isaac, we face fear, loss, and uncertainty? The first thing we learn about Isaac after the mountain is that he meets and marries Rebecca. He is able to get on with it because he finds someone with whom to go on, someone to share his anguish, someone who listens and brings comfort. Like Isaac, we all need someone who will give us a hand when necessary and a

push when required. Loneliness is the perfect breeding ground for despair. Sometimes when we are going through a hard time, when we are staring at a knife poised just above us, what is most important is someone else's hand.

I believe the second thing the angels taught Isaac was to forget some things and forgive others. We easily forget appointments, but we remember grudges for years. We misplace things but never resentments. And those grudges and resentments eat away at our spirit and corrode our souls.

If every day Isaac woke up and relived the day on the mountain when his father almost sacrificed him, I don't think he would have ever gotten out of bed. The experience of being bound to an altar changed Isaac. He could never return to the innocence he had once known. He would never be the person who with light-hearted step climbed the mountain. But even though he could not wipe the experience from his memory, he could forgive his father and his God, look at Rebecca and his children, and focus on the present moment. And he could still find reason for laughter.

Sometimes we are so stuck in the past that we cannot change, or so afraid of a future over which we have limited control, that we don't really appreciate the present – the very moment before us. We worry about what happened or what will happen, and we forget about what is happening. I have been there; we all have. We squander the one thing we have for certain – now.

Finally, the last thing that the angels gave Isaac was hope. When we face trauma, when everything we believe in is turned upside down, hope is all there is to keep us from giving up or giving in. It is what enables us to get up and walk down the mountain, to keep planting trees even if we may not be around to see them grow and offer shade.

When times have been especially difficult in my life, I would look at the evening star to find the first star, and then I would repeat in my heart a rhyme remembered from my childhood:

*Star light, star bright,
first star I see tonight,
I wish I may, I wish I might
have the wish I wish tonight.*

Despite the persistence of this childhood fantasy, I know that there is a difference between wishing and hoping. Wishing leaves the work up to someone else; it is passive; it asks. Nothing of us. Hoping demands that we make a commitment to work toward whatever it is we hope for. Whenever I confront my personal trials and fears, I try to heed the wisdom of Isaac's healing angels. Find support in another. Forget some things and forgive others. Laugh whenever possible and celebrate whenever you can. Embrace the present moment. And never, never give up hope.

WHERE DO YOU SEE YOURSELF IN THE STORY?

Are there times you have felt like Isaac, bound to a situation with little promise of release?

How do you get on with it, when you can't get over it?

Who or what is your saving angel?