

A Preacher's Dilemma

One of the great privileges of being a priest is being able to spend time exploring the lectionary readings for the coming weeks. I always like to know what I am going to be preaching on well in advance, so that I can begin brainstorming sermon ideas, doing research, and thinking about how I am going to present the readings in a way that I hope will connect with the congregation. I try to think of questions that you will have when you hear the readings on Sunday. I try to make the readings understandable but also relevant to contemporary life.

Sometimes the readings are relatively straightforward to preach on, and sometimes they are more challenging. I think it would be safe to say that our reading for this coming Sunday from Genesis ([Genesis 22:1-14](#)) would fall into the latter category.

We continue with the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac. After being granted a son in his old age, Abraham is now being asked to offer his son as a sacrifice to God. How could this be? Anyone reading this story would find it deeply upsetting and difficult to reconcile with the notion of a loving God. Anyone who is a parent or grandparent would immediately identify with the dilemma that Abraham faced: obey God and be willing to sacrifice his son, or disobey God in order to save his son's life.

There is no easy way to preach a sermon on this reading. I often wonder why a reading so difficult was even included in the lectionary. There are many things preachers could do to avoid dealing with this reading, and I must admit some of these things have crossed my mind.

Instead of wrestling with the story of Abraham and Isaac, I could instead preach on the Gospel. But this week's Gospel is not very long and fairly self-explanatory, so in my mind that's not really an option. I could preach on the New Testament reading this week from Romans instead. But again, it is fairly self-explanatory. The same is true for the Psalm for this week. I could have chosen to use the alternate reading in the lectionary this week from Jeremiah. But our practice has always been to use what the lectionary calls the "continuous" readings - that is, to follow major stories or themes from the Old Testament / Hebrew scriptures from week to week. We have been doing that as we hear the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac. To change that this week and then go back to it next week would leave a break in the story.

With the other readings this week being shorter and more self-explanatory, it is as if the theologians who developed the lectionary are forcing us to look at this reading and to preach on it. I believe that every passage in the Bible is important for us to read and hear, no matter how difficult it might be to understand and apply to our lives.

With this principle in mind, I decided to take a bold step and not side-step this week's difficult reading, but instead face it head on. I had to do more research than I usually would for a sermon. This was mostly to find some explanations that would be satisfying to me, and which I thought would make sense to you.

I hope that you will join us for online worship on Sunday as we hear this difficult passage read, and I unpack it and explain why it is important for us today. In stepping outside our comfort zone we learn and grow and gain new understandings. I hope you will take that step with me.

Jonathon +
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