

Sermon preached at Gisborne

O God, our guide, set your path clearly before us and lead us to follow you willingly for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Genesis 22:1-14; Matthew 10:40-42

Questioning Faith

Early this year, I had a chance to see my extended family and friends in Seoul, South Korea. While I was staying there, I wanted to have a short trip to Kyoto in Japan. So, I booked an air ticket, packed my bag. I didn't forget to include a Japanese travel phrase book and iPad for navigation. I flew from Seoul to Osaka and then got on the train to Kyoto. By the time I got off the train at Kyoto station, it was 9 pm. Even though I had the phrase book, navigation on iPad, and the address, it took for me more than one and a half hours to find the Air B&B which was located less than 15-minute walking distance from Kyoto station. In the end, it was not these tools that I had thought useful, but a person out of nowhere, who could speak in English helped me find the house. Questioning faith is a similar process in our faith journey. We are learning how to let things go that we used to cherish by receiving new life and perspectives from God so that we can see things from the new vantage point.

In Genesis 22:1-14, God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac as a burnt offering. Here we observe two different things. When this impossible task was given, Abraham didn't ask why but just obeyed. But Isaac asked Abraham, 'Father, where is the lamb for a burnt offering?'(v7b). It can be our question, too, because God's command doesn't make sense from our perspectives. So we'll begin our discussion from this question. Next, we'll see other examples of questioning faith in scripture, and lastly how this questioning faith helps us let things go, including one's old self will be followed.

1. Father, where is the lamb for a burnt offering?

Abram was 75 years old at the time of his departure from Haran (12:4). He was married to Sarai (later Sarah), but they had no children—and at their age, they had no reason to believe that they would ever have a child. In the end, as promised by God, Isaac was born to him when Abraham was a hundred years old.¹ It is an extraordinary story by itself. Yet the following is more remarkable, namely 'the sacrifice of Isaac' and by Jews 'the akedah'(עקד) (the binding' of Isaac), which has been heated debate over centuries. Depend on perspectives, it can be about an abusive God, or a misguided Abraham, or religious violence, or a story of faith and obedience. If we stick to reasoning and reasoning only, we'll never get any satisfactory answers. But if we probe into this question prayerfully, we'll undoubtedly find a way to which this question will lead us.

The story begins, 'After these things, God tested Abraham' (22:1). Many things have happened so far including God's call to Abraham to go to a land he has never been to; God's promise of Abraham that he will be the father of a great nation; the long years of Sarah's barrenness; the birth of Ishmael; and at long last the impossible birth of the boy they call 'Laughter.' Then Abraham, at Sarah's insistence, casts out his first son, Ishmael, with great sorrow. And now, God demands the most horrible thing:

"Take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I will show you" (22:2). As presumed, this story foreshadows the story that forms the foundation of Christian faith – the story of the death and resurrection of the beloved son, son of Abraham, son of David, Son of God. Yet, we can't help but pay attention to the question asked by the son – Isaac. 'Father, where is the lamb for a burnt offering?' To this, Abraham enigmatically said to Isaac, 'God will **provide**- יִרְאֶה! himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son' (v. 8a).² The word 'provide' is not a literal translation of the original Hebrew - יִרְאֶה! as it means, 'see/reveal.' That is, 'God will see himself the lamb for a burnt offering.' Although the questioner was Isaac, God's command may already have made Abraham gave up his personal desire or plans all over again. Still, we remain in the dark with this question – why God did such a thing. For this, we will read a few examples of questioning faith in scripture.

¹ Genesis 21:5

² Genesis 22:8 :יִרְאֶה אֱלֹהִים יִרְאֶה לְךָ הַשָּׂה לְעֹלָה בְּנִי וְיִלְכֶיךָ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו:

2. **Questioning faith in scripture**

Questioning faith or questioning God is not new in scripture. One of the well-known examples is Job, and the culmination of questioning faith can be found in Jesus' final question on the cross.³ In the case of Job, people tend to think that the book is about Job's suffering. It is because Job seemed to suffer from no reasons even though God praised him as a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil.⁴

The thing that prompts Job's friends to make their speeches is his outburst in chapter 3. After seven days of silence with his friends (and probably weeks of suffering before they came), "Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. And Job said, 'Let the day perish wherein I was born'" (3:1-3).

The weeks of relentless pain has worn him out. He now questions God. Verse 11: "Why did I not die at birth, come forth from the womb and expire? Why did the knees receive me? Or why the breasts, that I should suck?" Verse 20: "Why is light given to him that is in misery, and life to the bitter in soul, who long for death, but it comes not?" Although there is no mention about God, his dire questions are addressed to God. Job cannot see any reason now for why he should have ever been given life. It is a protest against God, because, "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away" (1:21). Although the manner of sufferings is different, Abraham's invisible pain during the journey to the land of Moriah is not different from Job's. Both – Job and Abraham and later Isaac, they had to see their old self was dismantled bit by bit through the events in their lives. As for Job who used to live as a God-fearing person (e.g. there is no one like him on earth!) also became a subject to be transformed into something new. For Abraham, his firm belief in that the promise of God had been fulfilled by the birth of Isaac had to go also. Now he was about to carry out what God commanded him. God's testing Abraham is nothing but to dismantle his old self to make him new to become a father of many nations, and questioning faith is part of this process.

Questioning faith in our faith journey

Until now, Isaac's question – 'Father, where is the lamb of a burnt offering?' has led us to another question – why God commanded Abraham to do such a thing? Abraham's answer: 'God will see/reveal/select himself the lamb for a burnt offering' gives a tiny clue to us. By the time Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son, we inadvertently, through our spiritual eyes, look at Abraham, not Isaac and we see his anguish, despair, and the terror that he was experiencing. For Abraham, it was not Isaac who was bound and laid on the altar, but Abraham himself. Seeing who was the real sacrificial lamb at that moment can only be inferred by this – God will 'see' himself the lamb for a burnt offering. What did God see as the sacrificial lamb, do you think?

Many people find this story offensive because it portrays God as commanding child sacrifice. However, it is not a story about child sacrifice but is rather a story about obedience to God—about faith. For the reasons, much later, when God gives the law to Moses, God will make it clear that child sacrifice is not permissible.⁵ While God will require the gift of the firstborn⁶ God also allowed parents to redeem the firstborn male's life with the life of a sheep.⁷

We often forget that this questioning faith is based on our belief in the goodness of God, who does not want suffering for God's children. Indeed, God wants us to prosper with blessings. But time and time again, this prosperity and blessings are not what we may imagine as they are based on our desire, wishes, and human greed. The binding of Isaac tells us plainly that living in faith is only through our total surrender to the will and grace of God, nothing else. Questioning faith allows us to have the courage to be honest about our struggles and pain. At the same time, it will also enable us to face the hardest part of seeing one's old self go to be born again as a new creation through our crucified Lord.⁸ This understanding and this faith are the true rewards that lead us to life in the eternal. In the end, all these things have already been completed and proclaimed on the cross two thousand years before. So to whom can we go to find eternal life?⁹ May God help us understand it. Amen

³ Matthew 27:46 "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

⁴ Job 1:8

⁵ Leviticus 18:21; 20:2-5; Deuteronomy 12:31; 18:10).

⁶ (Exodus 22:29),

⁷ (Exodus 13:13; 34:20).

⁸ Romans 6:6 p- We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.

⁹ John 6:68