

“All is riddle”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
July 9, 2017

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

On April 10, as Jenna and I cradled our stillborn sons in our arms, I read a poem by that famed American philosopher of the 19th century—Ralph Waldo Emerson. He wrote “Threnody” after his first-born son Waldo contracted scarlet fever and died within a week. Waldo was five years old. Long and labored, “Threnody” weaves through rage and sorrow, remembering the boy who played in the garden now empty, and lands firmly on an accusation.

Waldo’s death doesn’t compute. It doesn’t fit. This isn’t the world Emerson believed in. A perfect and divine power was supposed to course through nature and soul, binding all things together and freeing them to overcome every obstacle. But now, faced with the death of his son, Emerson beholds a universe cold and limp. His philosophy fails him. He writes in his journal, “Sorrow makes us all children again... The wisest knows nothing.” And in his poem, he writes:

*The South-wind brings
Life, sunshine, and desire,
And on every mount and meadow
Breathes aromatic fire;
But over the dead he has no power,
The lost, the lost, he cannot restore;
And, looking over the hills, I mourn
The darling who shall not return...*

*Was there no star that could be sent,
No watcher in the firmament,
No angel from the countless host
That loiters round the crystal coast,
Could stoop to heal that only child?...*

*O truth’s and nature’s costly lie!
O trusted broken prophecy!*

So easily could Emerson’s words be Abraham’s, when he is told to take his promised son and kill him. So easily could these be our words as we wrestle with this story—and with every life experience—that just doesn’t fit our idea of who God is.

God is supposed to be full of love and power. But this God in the 22nd chapter of Genesis feels small, capricious, and cruel.

You and I know this God. We’ve seen his face in suffering unredeemed, in loved ones unsaved, in cruelty unchanged.

Our instinct is to try to make this little God of suffering fit into our larger God of grace, like some Russian nesting doll.

For centuries, scholars and theologians have come to the defense of God and offered reasonable explanations for the unreasonable binding of Isaac. Perhaps, this story is simply a justification for Israel's rejection of child sacrifice. Or maybe all of this happens in order to reveal God as the One who provides and saves. Or perhaps this isn't about killing Isaac at all; it's about gratefully recognizing who's in charge of Isaac's life.

For Ellen Davis, this story is about God's vulnerability. God has entrusted the promise of the whole world to one man, risking everything on Abraham. God has given God's whole heart, all of God's love, to Abraham, and now God needs to know that Abraham (who hasn't exactly been a stellar example of faith up to this point) will love God back, that Abraham isn't just in this for himself.

On the other hand, some Christians read this text and say that's not my God! Our recent visitor and speaker, Doug Pagitt, has found an elegant solution. He observes that the text uses two words to refer to God: *Elohim* (who commands the sacrifice) and *Yahweh* (who stops the sacrifice). Pagitt believes that this is actually a contest between Abraham's old Canaanite gods who require sacrifice (named *elohim*) and Abraham's new God who promises grace and does not require sacrifice (named *Yahweh*).

In the end, though, these explanations don't satisfy. They each grab hold of a thread of truth but no more. They want to solve the problem of this text, and they can't. Pagitt certainly can't.

The word *Elohim* can indeed refer to pagan gods, but it's also used plenty in the Bible as a synonym for *Yahweh*. *Elohim* is the One who creates the world in the first verse of the Bible; *Elohim* is the One who calls Moses out of the burning bush. It's paired here with a singular verb and so probably refers to the Lord, not multiple gods. But even more importantly, the God who saves Isaac praises the attempted sacrifice, meaning it must have been, according to the author, what God wanted.

So, I guess, we're back where we started—with more questions than answers.

And I think this is exactly where God wants us.

Let's look back at the story itself. What we see is a story structured around mystery. God gives Abraham no explanation for the command, no assurance of what is to come. Isaac too is given no truthful account of what is to happen. Sarah is never even told. In fact, the text implies that *God* doesn't know what's going to happen. The fact that God needs to test Abraham presumes that God doesn't know what Abraham will do.

In an essay titled "Illusions," written many years after his son's death, Emerson declares, "Life is a succession of lessons which must be lived to be understood. All is riddle, and the key to a riddle is another riddle."

Together, father, son, and God walk through mystery, through secret, discovering life along the way, all in a text that is meant to be irreducible. In the words of Jacques Derrida, our story contains at its heart “an abyss that resists totalizing summary.”

We’re not supposed to let God off the hook or tidy the story up. It’s here because stories like this happen every day. Horrible, painful things happen in the world, and no theology can adequately tell us why God allows these things to happen—these burnt offerings or, in English, these “holocausts.”

We are not meant to explain God, or suffering, or life. We are meant to wrestle with them in silent wonder.

God has given us in Scripture a text so challenging, so uprooting, so disturbing, that it forces us to abandon all our neat theories about God and brings us face to face with the unimpeachable mystery of existence.

Genesis 22 is a thorn in our side, a stumbling block we are unable to remove. It stands before us, always a garish sign of how little we understand. It compels us into a posture of humility, inquiry, and awe. No longer do we try to use our ideas to hold God but rather we allow God to hold us.

Ellen Davis writes, “When reason fails, as it does at least one Friday each year [when Jesus is crucified, sacrificed], then we must listen to the stories with our hearts.”

What we hear is that this mystery, as terrible and painful as it can be, contains a promise. God will be with us. We will face life’s beauty and suffering, walking together as Abraham and Isaac once did, and there on the mountain, we will receive not answers but something better: God’s very presence. Not an explanation, but a living experience of God.

“All is riddle” is only part of the truth. “All is riddle,” yes, but all is grace too.

God shows up and lives with us.

This is what Emerson discovers in his poem “Threnody,” when his desperate plea to understand encounters the response of what he calls the “deep Heart.” This heart tells him that he is not alone. Yes, the voice says, there is indeed a “mystic gulf from God to man,” a “tidal flow” of life that cannot be stilled, or comprehended, any more than a star could be nailed to its track on the zodiac. Yes, there are mysteries that transcend belief and speech. But he peers at those mysteries, not only with his eyes, but with the “joyful eye” of his son, Waldo, who even now is with him.

That joyful eye reveals beauty, inviting Emerson to live, to say to life those vulnerable words once uttered by Abraham: “Here I am.” He may not understand life, but he can live it. The heart asks, “Wilt thou not open thy heart to know what rainbows teach, and sunsets show?”

The lesson is a riddle, and it is this:

*'Tis not within the force of fate
The fate-conjoined to separate...*

*What is excellent,
As God lives, is permanent;
Hearts are dust, hearts' loves remain;
Heart's love will meet thee again.*

*Not of adamant and gold
Built he heaven stark and cold;
No, but a nest of bending reeds,
Flowering grass, and scented weeds...
Built of tears and sacred flames,
And virtue reaching to its aims;
Built of furtherance and pursuing,
Not of spent deeds, but of doing.
Silent rushes the swift Lord
Through ruined systems still restored,
Broadsowing, bleak and void to bless,
Plants with worlds the wilderness;
Waters with tears of ancient sorrow
Apples of Eden ripe to-morrow.
House and tenant go to ground,
Lost in God, in Godhead found.*

In the end, I can no more explain this story of the binding of Isaac, than I can explain God or suffering or life itself. But like Emerson and Abraham before me, I refuse to look away. I will face it, all of it. I will take it by the hand and dance with it, in wonder. And though I may be no wiser by the end, I will have lived in the presence of God. And that will have made all the difference. Won't you join me?

Amen.