

**HEDGING BETS VS. GOING ALL-IN; GENESIS 22: 1-14; JULY 2, 2017;
THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

The Temple in Jerusalem, the western wall of which is the infamous “Wailing Wall” where not just Jews but people of all traditions come to pray, is built over Mt. Moriah, where Abraham bound Isaac and legend says God created the world.

This is the same site where legend claims Mohammed, the founder of Islam, ascended to heaven. It is remarkable that the same piece of real estate holds such importance for two of the world’s great religions. But that is Jerusalem – an ancient city where the roots of Abraham and his heirs are intertwined.

When our interfaith tour went to the Wailing Wall to pray we were moved by the antiquity, by people of every age, shape and color from every continent, and by standing in front of this ancient place of prayer that elicits humility as we pleaded for peace and healing.

We anticipated being at the wall and sorted through our concerns for what we ought to pray for; like having, I suppose, an audience with the Pope, choosing what you want to say, making the most of a rare opportunity, wanting every word to count.

After identifying my deepest concerns, I wrote my prayers for the world and nation, church and family on slips of white paper, then wedged them into the great stone blocks of the wall – some of them forty feet long weighing over five hundred tons – evoking the presence of the immutable, invisible God.

My prayers were among thousands of other of tiny folded slips and scraps of paper embedded in the wall or fallen and littering the ground at the base of the wall almost like cherry blossoms.

Next to me was a Hasidic Jew in his long black coat, wide-brimmed black hat and long black beard swaying back and forth Torah in both hands praying, next to me on the other side was a tattooed, purple-haired teenager and next to him a well dressed tourist with an expensive looking leather bag on his shoulder uttering prayers in the blunt staccato of a northern European language.

The wall, as specifically Jewish and ethnic as it is, transcends all religions and ethnicities. Our Israeli tour guide told us the last time she came to the Wall was with two middle aged, very secular, non-religious couples from Canada who came back from the plaza where the Wall stands with tears in their eyes.

How to explain this gathering place along with others – like the Great Buddha of Thailand, the Paleolithic cave drawings of southern France, or the Nine/Eleven Memorial in Manhattan – man made structures and art that remind us of our profoundest longing and deepest hopes? They are places where we experience our connectedness and common humanity regardless of our differences and the source, whatever we choose to name it, of this gift. You see, the Western Wall where Abraham bound Isaac incorporates more than that disturbing event; it marks a moment in the emerging relationship of the human and divine that defines God’s claim upon us and our claim upon God and whose power and energy attracts us even now to this room.

Getting up close to the origins of a religion or nation or family can be like touching a live electric appliance or outlet. You get a shock, a total awareness of the power that brought that faith or nation or people into being.

Of course you have to be open, let go of the analytical distance and objectivity of the mind for the subjectivity and inwardness of the heart.

Like visiting Independence Hall where that remarkable generation of leaders worked out, negotiated, and agreed upon – that is created – the document that marked the beginning of the American experiment; it doesn't take much to summon the images and spirit of the third session of the continental congress as they unanimously adopted The Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776.

Sacred texts can also convey the coalescing power of a religion or a nation. I was leafing through my *Harvard Classics* volume of American Historical Documents this weekend and came across the Gettysburg Address a high voltage statement from the midst of the crisis of the Civil War. President Lincoln had journeyed to Gettysburg from Washington by train the day before and took notes on a scrap of paper for the speech he would give at the battle site that had been turned into a cemetery. His mission was to dedicate the blood-soaked land as a final resting place for the dead.

Lincoln's speech harnessed the power of the Declaration of Independence's "all men are created equal" to include black men – a remarkable feat and vision that transformed our founding declaration and young nation into a world destination about which Emma Lazarus would write in her famous 1903 poem placed at the base of the Statue of Liberty:

"Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, the tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

It was less than a year after his Emancipation Proclamation that Lincoln's Gettysburg vision was delivered and galvanized a nation to embrace the Proclamation's protection for the rights of former slaves – and to justify the escalating costs in dollars and human lives to ensure that victory.

The Gettysburg Address recommitted the Union to the high principles upon which the nation was founded and depended upon for its survival. In three minutes Lincoln's speech, which followed the three hour oration of Harvard President Edward Everett, would become a literary Independence Hall extending constitutional rights for all. The last sentence of the great speech is as fresh, needed and relevant in these times as when it was first proclaimed.

"It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

We're talking about sacred places and sacred texts that are foundational for our faith and nation; places and texts made holy by their broad, inclusive vision, and by the truth and power of their eloquence as stories; stories that capture what it means to be human and the heroic contributions of those who rose to the occasion when the world turned dark and the forces of evil encroached.

Although we can't be at the wall this morning we have today the story of the 'binding of Isaac' from the primitive beginnings of our faith. It is a disturbing tale and for that reason all the more intriguing for its inclusion in the bible and its celebration as a landmark literary event in world civilization.

For Soren Kierkegaard, the towering Danish philosopher who re-introduced Christianity to Denmark for which the faith had become a social nicety and lost all meaning, the binding of Isaac is the core story for grasping human identity and our relationship to the holy.

If as Phil told us the binding of Isaac is a transcultural story that marks the end of human sacrifice and surfaces in other cultures and religions in various forms, to leave it at that would be like saying Rembrandt discovered the use of light in painting or Bach the possibilities of the fugue or Dickens the plight of the poor and never listen to a fugue or study a Rembrandt or read Dickens.

Scholars pay homage to this troubling tale as one of the peaks of ancient narrative comparable with the *Odyssey*. The most revered of them claim their legacies commenting on this complex story cycle that begins with God's summons to Abraham and Sarah to leave their hometown and become the progenitors of a great nation. The cycle concludes on Mt. Moriah when a voice from heaven commands Abraham not to harm the boy.

The saga revolves around Abraham's relationship with God, and their parrying, sparring advances and retreats with one another. Well into his 90s and childless some rabbis say Abraham's negotiating over the destruction of Sodom is less about mercy than it is his resentment of the broken promise of fertility. Then, in the destruction of Sodom the Lord gives Abraham both a warning and a reassuring demonstration of his power: the one who has the power to take so much life so suddenly and violently surely also has the power to give life. ⁱ

Yet, like a thick-headed disciple of Jesus, Abraham refers to Sarah as his sister in a fumbling attempt to save his own skin when they pass through the kingdom of Abimelech. In doing so, he denies his covenant with God and his and Sarah's exalted status as the parents of God's people and through them God's blessing to all people.

God is not impressed. The couple adds insult to injury when God appears before the nonagenarians as three travelers to whom Abraham extends the hospitality of his tent and table and one of the travelers informs Abraham that Sarah will give birth to a son.

Sarah listening behind the kitchen door, as it were, bursts out in laughter – another slap in the face to the one who called them, has journeyed with them and with whom he has entrusted his dreams.

After announcing that Sarah will give birth and listening to her incredulity God interrogates Abraham asking why Sarah laughed then asks rhetorically, “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord.”

The plot thickens as the Lord requires Abraham’s righteousness to keep the promise of fathering a great nation. This sudden reminder that his integrity is now required for the fulfillment of the promise was not a condition at the start and sounds like a game invoking a new rule that slants the contest.

The saga continues, Isaac is born and less than a chapter later comes the abrupt instruction to Abraham to sacrifice his son. It feels at this point almost more like the tenth round of a heavy weight prize fight than the fulfillment of the Creator’s promise to bless all the nations.

Abraham does not, after all, slay Isaac, and maybe never would have. One Midrash says he goes as far as he can without doing the deed, yet God chooses to be satisfied.

From here on, they are linked not just by a covenant but perhaps a truce. A subtle but profound shift comes over their relationship, the intense drama that leads to this moment releases, and the biblical narrative changes.ⁱⁱ

Until now, God’s actions seemed without motive and unpredictable. God and Abraham appear to know themselves and one another better. This is long before anything Jewish even exists.

The saga ends with Abraham naming the place “the Lord sees” or in Hebrew YHWH – yireh, referring to the answer he gave when Isaac asked, ‘Where is the lamb?’ and he said, “the Lord will see to it” meaning the Lord sees into the future and provides.

But most scholars agree that it is not clear whether it is God or the person who comes to the Mount who sees or is seen.ⁱⁱⁱ I like to think it is both.

In any case, this is where God himself is named by Abraham – YHWH becomes the term God’s people will use as they face Pharaoh, wander in the wilderness, build a great nation, are taken into exile and return home to build a temple on the place where Abraham sacrificed a ram and named God and in doing so gave birth to their nation and faith.

What does it all mean? Not that faith is good for us or useful like CPR training; but that faith is enlightened self-awareness in a dynamic human/divine relationship where we struggle with whatever it is that calls forth our best and highest selves.

The point is also, as much as he is extolled, that Abraham was far from perfect. What inspires is his perseverance, his willingness to stay engaged, to keep listening and responding even if sometimes feeling abandoned or angry.

We can’t be asked to do more than Abraham, going step by step to *our* mountain of sacrifice, even in fear and trembling as Kierkegaard said, even if our own trust in the promise Abraham gave Isaac wobbles between reality and delusion. But that much we can do.

We can’t be asked to do more than Abraham; but given the state of our nation and world, the plight of the poor and threat to the climate, to do any less, to give in to cynicism, rage or indifference would be to abdicate our religion and citizenship. +

ⁱ Jack Miles, *God: A Biography*, (Vintage Books: New York, 1999) 60ff.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 60ff.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Genesis*, Robert Alter, (Norton: New York, 1996) 107ff.