“Children’s Stories” - Stephanie Sorge, 9/14/25

 For some reason, I couldn’t find this story in any of the Children’s Bibles I really like. However, when I was looking for coloring pages, I was really surprised to find multiple options, including a truly horrific image with a small boy hog-tied face-down on an altar, with Abraham wielding the knife, ready to bring it down. Less graphic but just as horrifying was an image of Abraham standing next to Isaac, hand on his shoulder, both looking at an empty altar. Reaching down from the sky is a giant hand, aggressively pointing at the altar as if to say, “No more stalling - get to it!”

 This is one of the stories that I find increasingly difficult to deal with. Try as I might, I can’t choke a redeeming angle from it. Of course, times were different. Children were seen very differently back then. They weren’t cute or precious or doted upon. Child sacrifice was within the scope of religious practice in the ancient Near East. We might struggle to understand Abraham’s willingness to carry out the command from God, but in his context, this would have been understood as a faithful response, not a reprehensible act.

 The stakes were high, since Isaac was the long-promised, long-awaited child of Abraham and Sarah. But maybe that was the point. Their miracle son would have been an unparalleled sacrifice. Maybe Abraham understood. Maybe even Isaac understood. Maybe they held out hope to the very end that God would flip the script and change the ending. We laud Abraham’s faith - faith so strong that he would be ready to do anything that God commanded. Abraham was a product of his time. My bigger issue is how God is portrayed in this story.

 Christians have often drawn parallels between the near-sacrifice of Isaac and the sacrifice of Jesus. God didn’t ask Abraham to do anything God wasn’t prepared to do. I see at least two problems with this. First, the mystery of the Triune God is the unity of the three. There is no power differential between God and Jesus. What we see on the cross isn’t child sacrifice, it’s self-sacrificial love. Second, this story stands on its own in the Hebrew Bible. We have to reckon with the story of a god who tells Abraham to kill his own child - the giant hand coming down from the sky, pointing to the altar.

 Of course, God stopped Abraham before the knife came down. But even if this was God’s way of testing Abraham’s willingness to obey, I can’t worship the kind of god who would want people to be ready and willing to kill, just to prove their faith.

 This is also at odds with God’s self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. Jesus welcomed the little children to come to him. He cherished them when others didn’t. He didn’t condone violence, even when threatened or provoked. Belief in the unity of God compels me to reject the depiction of God in this story. God does not delight in death - especially the death of children.

 Why didn’t Abraham question God? Because this command fit within his worldview. It fit within the worldview of the writers and editors of these sacred verses. We do not believe that Scripture is inerrant. We take the Bible seriously, and as serious students of the Bible, we know that understanding the context of composition and transmission is a critical component of interpretation. But at the end of the day, the final authority is God alone.

 So, we look to Jesus. Can you imagine Jesus ever suggesting that one ought to be ready to sacrifice one’s own child? The same person who told stories of a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son? Jesus talks about sacrifice - even leaving one’s father or mother behind to follow him - but the thought of Jesus condoning human sacrifice of any kind is beyond my imagination.

 Abraham accepted the idea of sacrificing his child because it fit within his worldview. What do we accept because it is the water in which we swim? Do we accept the starvation of millions in Gaza? Do we accept profiling based on skin color and language spoken? Do we accept parents being detained and deported, leaving traumatized and vulnerable children behind? Do we accept the gutting of programs that feed hungry children, provide medical care, or offer support for housing and other basic necessities? I don’t think any of us accepts any of those things willingly, and certainly not as the will of God, but I’m shocked by the number of self-identified Christians who do.

 It’s hard to think of child sacrifice as something anyone would condone, but maybe our national response to the epidemic of gun violence suggests otherwise. In this country, since 2020, guns have been the leading cause of death for children between the ages of 1 and 18.[[1]](#footnote-1) The mass shootings are horrific, but most of those deaths are not from mass shootings. Whether the shooting is accidental, self-inflicted, or targeted violence, the tool is the same. At what point will the carnage be enough for us to decide, as a nation, that the lives of children are more important than the absolute, unfettered right to bear arms?

 The Second Amendment might guarantee the right to bear arms, but the rhetoric I most often hear is about our “God-given” right. Did God really give us an inalienable right to weapons of murder and mass killing? I can’t think of anything in the Bible that supports such a claim. On the other hand, I remember a story at the scene of Jesus’s arrest, and how Peter drew his sword and cut off the ear of a servant of the High Priest. Was he trying to defend himself? His companions? Was he trying to defend Jesus, or maybe give him a chance to get away? Did it matter? Jesus’s response was clear: “Put the sword back. Those who live by the sword will die by the sword.” Those who live by the gun will die by the gun.

 We are sacrificing our sons on the altar of guns. From 2003-2021, boys accounted for 83% of the gun deaths in children between the ages of 1 and 18.[[2]](#footnote-2) Nearly 40% of the victims were Black, compared to their 13-14% representation in the overall population. Not only are we sacrificing Black boys at much higher rates, we are also scapegoating them. The day after Charlie Kirk was killed, five Historically Black Colleges and Universities were on lockdown because of threats made, including Hampton and Virginia State.[[3]](#footnote-3) Charlie Kirk had a history of making hateful and dehumanizing comments about Black people, regularly and publicly. The shooter was, as so many have been, a white male. But threats of violence swiftly turned towards Black students.

 We are sacrificing our children to gun violence and white supremacy, and all of it is being draped in the flag and carried out in God’s name. This is White Christian nationalism, now a dominant voice in American Christianity - if not by numbers, at least in volume. In case we need the reminder, Jesus wasn’t White, Christian, or American, though one might easily forget that in this current climate.

 So, what kind of god calls a father to sacrifice his son? The same kind of god that proclaims gun ownership as a right. The same kind of god who is said to have made certain races and genders superior to others. A god of human creation.

 It has long been a human tendency to make God in our image. What if Isaac had asked his dad if, maybe, he could just not kill him? I imagine Abraham responding, “I’m sorry, son, but my hands are tied.” Abraham was bound by the limits of his worldview - one that included child sacrifice as an acceptable act of worship. Isaac was bound with rope. Jesus came to unbind and liberate, to continue the work of the liberating God who called Abraham to follow a different path from his family and neighbors. Abraham didn’t always get it right, and neither do we.

 We are human, like Abraham. And like Abraham, we are trying to be faithful to the God we worship and serve. Also like Abraham, we might mistake the voices around us or inside of us for God’s voice. How do we know the difference? We have to listen to the Word of God, look to the example of Jesus Christ, and seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit within a community of faith. Then, we need to challenge the narratives - even those in the Bible - that claim God’s authority while condoning actions that lead to oppression, injustice, and violence.

 If we’re still in doubt? We listen to the children. We hear their stories. We seek their safety and flourishing. Jesus was clear: whoever welcomes a child, welcomes God, and God doesn’t want any child to perish.

 At the end of the day, I have to conclude that God, our loving creator, neither requires nor condones the sacrifice of any child. Will we?

1. https://www.cnn.com/health/guns-death-us-children-teens-dg [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/72/wr/mm7250a1.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://thehill.com/homenews/state-watch/5498638-hbcus-campus-threats-charlie-kirk-shooting/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)