



One Page Sermon

By Pastor Robb McCoy

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#BeGrounded Genesis 22:1-14 — The binding of Isaac

What do George Burns, Alanis Morissette, and Morgan Freeman have in common? If you have seen the movies “Oh God,” “Dogma,” and “Evan Almighty,” you may have known that all three actors played the role of God on film.

It is an interesting thing to cast God in a movie. All three of these movies were comedies and had levels of irreverence that may make some bristle (it has been a long time since I’ve seen “Oh God,” or “Dogma,” but I recently saw “Evan Almighty” and endorse it wholeheartedly). Still though, when the Bible puts the voice of God in direct quotes, I can’t help but wonder if that has shaped the way we understand the voice of God.

I can say with confidence that God has spoken to me, but never in the form of Morgan Freeman. I have heard God’s voice, but I don’t know if I could ever put God’s words in direct quotes. I think this an important thing to consider when we read Bible stories when God and a person are having a conversation. God’s voice isn’t easy to record verbatim. In this story in particular it seems even the text is confused. Sometimes it is God and Abraham talking, sometimes it is a “messenger of God” who seems to be speaking directly on behalf of God.

The exchange that is here between God and Abraham just seems so out of character—for both of them. First of all, in Genesis 21:12 God promised Abraham that “your descendants will be traced through Isaac.” It seems strange for God to go back on this promise. Second, in Genesis 18, God tells Abraham that God is going to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gamora. Abraham famously objects and talks God down, instigating a negotiation process in hopes of finding 10 innocent people. Now in chapter 22, God tells Abraham to kill his son, and Abraham has no objection? Both the request and the compliance are incongruent with the nature of both God and Abraham.

This has been a story that has troubled thinking people of faith for centuries. To simply say that God tested Abraham, Abraham was faithful, and God rewarded Abraham is to deny the nature of God, the power of God’s promise, and Abraham’s own humanity and integrity. Let me offer you this thought about the story.

Human sacrifice was a part of the ancient world. It was a known religious practice, perhaps even a practice with which Abraham was familiar. Abraham left his father’s land and gods behind and set out on a new adventure fueled

by the promise of YHWH (translated in most English Bibles as The LORD). It took time for YHWH and Abraham to figure out this relationship. God had decided to bless Abraham so that Abraham could bless the world. This was a new thing for both of them. Yet the gods of Abraham’s father still lingered.

Perhaps Abraham thought that sacrificing Isaac is what God required. Perhaps he couldn’t let go of this harmful way of knowing God—so God gave him a chance to turn away forever. And when Abraham picked up the knife, he actually failed the test. When he saw the ram and put the knife down, he realized there was another way. Maybe the voice of God’s messenger was his own inner monologue—not Morgan Freeman. This moment of clarity came when Abraham was finally able to set aside the gods of his father.

So many of us cling to past ways of being and knowing. We cling to ways of life that we know are harmful. Family systems theory teaches us that we are but a part of an ongoing cycle. Many of us are forging a new path with a new understanding of God. While the faith of our parents might have been one of fear, manipulation, and control, we are trying to forge a new relationship with God.

When we discover that blind obedience leads to dangerous places, when we can interrogate the stories of our faith, and dig deeper into the Scripture we may discover the ram in the thicket. It is possible to leave behind the coercion and blind obedience of a fear-based faith. We can hear the voice of God in our hearts, telling us to put down the knife, see deeper into the thicket, and find a life-giving relationship with God.

