

Oh, *That's* What You Meant

Genesis 22:
Matthew 10:40-42

The signatories to the Declaration of Independence pledged to back their words with, “our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor.” For what idea would you and I pledge our lives, our wealth and our reputations? Honestly, when we see somebody go all in on principle it usually makes us suspicious. We think, “What's their angle?” *Nobody* really means it when they try to bluff you on ethical or moral grounds. But those men meant what they said. The 55 men who signed the Declaration have been criticized recently for their wealth and privilege. Some of them owned slaves. They got to the Continental Congress only because of their connections, we hear. Well, of course, this is correct. Every delegate knew the right people and had the means to go off to Philadelphia for weeks and weeks without pay. They also, however, had among them men of genius. Men of stubborn integrity. Men who could *write*. Men like John Adams, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson..

They wrote that the grievances against their freedoms and their reputations were great enough to require redress. *And they signed their names to the document.* It is easy to click anonymously on a social media poll. It is much harder to put your name to an essay expressing dissent to the powers that be. These men knew the risk they were taking and they took it anyway. You may already know that the vote to approve the Declaration actually took place on July 2, 1776. But it took two more days

for all the delegates to sign it, to print it in bulk, and to arrange a big ceremony to unveil it to the world. So today, July 2, 2023, might fairly be considered the 247th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.

The brilliant mid-twentieth century theologian Gerhard von Rad notes that when God called Abram to leave his home territory and trek to “the land that I will show you,” God was asking Abram to “forsake his past”. Here in Genesis 22, as God commands Abraham to sacrifice his only son on “a mountain I will show you,” von Ran notes God asks Abraham to “forsake his future.” In the former case, Abram must leave the security of a rich life for an unknown quantity. By the time we get to this part of his story Abraham has prospered in that new land. But God presents him with a new and severe test of faith. He and Sarah have waited decades to have a child. Then comes the miracle. Sarah gets pregnant in old age and bears a son, Isaac. Isaac has grown into a “lad”. He is big enough to carry firewood. In a time and place when infant and child mortality are rife, he has survived. And now God tells Abraham to kill him.

Of course, God does not phrase it quite that way. Aspiring authors of fiction are told to “show, not tell.” Tell the story through action, not presumptuous descriptions of the thoughts and feelings of the people in your story. The author of Genesis 22 does a masterful job of this. Never once does he attempt to describe Abraham's internal struggles. Instead, he gives us the dialogue between Yahweh, Abraham and Isaac, and tells us what each did. This leaves us with the privilege of imagining their thoughts and feelings. As a narrative device, it works superbly. The story moves

along quickly; the tension builds inexorably. God tells Abraham to sacrifice his only son “at a place I will show you.” Abraham obeys. Telling the sacrificial lamb nothing, he takes Isaac and two servants out into the wilderness. Isaac asks an intelligent question: “Here is the wood and the 'fire' (probably a flint rock used to spark a fire). Where is the animal you will sacrifice?” We realize that of the four people on this journey, only Abraham knows the answer is Isaac.

They see the place God has designated. Abraham has his two servants stay back, realizing they will attempt to stop him from sacrificing his own son. Abraham lays the wood and binds Isaac atop it, apparently without protest. Abraham almost reaches the point of no return, “extending” his hand with the knife to slay his son. But the Lord (the text says “angel of the Lord” but quickly reverts to just, “the Lord”) tells him to stop. Abraham has passed this test of faith. Having waited all those decades for a son, then getting one, and knowing he will have to explain it all to Sarah if he actually kills the boy, Abraham does not hesitate. The Lord has told him to do it. He almost does it. The Lord tells him to stop. He stops. He has passed this test of faith with flying colors.

But let us not ignore our own thoughts and feelings. How *do* you feel about this story? I will tell you I share the thoughts and feelings of a great many commentators and Christians with whom I have studied this passage over the years. I think, “What sort of God has the cruelty to put a person through such a lifetime of disappointment, only to grant him the blessing of a son, only to tell him to kill the boy?” I feel how

unfair and arbitrary the whole thing seems. I marvel that Abraham trusts God to such a complete degree. I honestly wonder if Abraham is all there.

Now, we know the rest of this story. We will dip into it in the coming weeks as the lectionary leads us through the remainder of Genesis. Isaac will survive, he will grow into a husband and father of two sons of his own. One of those sons, Jacob, will have twelve sons who will, in turn, become the sires of the twelve tribes of Israel. God's promise that Abraham will father a nation will come true. But here in Genesis 22 it all comes perilously close to ending. Yet Abraham trusts God even in this critical moment. How can we trust God when, despite whatever promises we may believe God has given us, it looks like it all will come crashing down?

With one, or perhaps two, exceptions, every man who signed the Declaration of Independence belonged to a Christian church. Not a few of them—including Jefferson—had serious doubts about the concept of a loving God who, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, had been sacrificed for the sins of the world. They believed a range of things about God but virtually all of them believed in a god. They believed in Providence with a capital P. They believed in a God-ordained destiny, that God knew what was going to happen and, most of them added, that God had set the machinery of the universe in motion to make it happen. They believed that their cause (liberty and representational government) was righteous, that it was just in the eyes of God. Thus they willingly signed their names to a document that said so, although in the eyes of the king their doing so was treason. Which was a hangable offense.

The war actually broke out a year before the Continental Congress, in 1775. It started with a surprising victory for the colonists at Lexington and Concord, followed by a bloody stalemate at Bunker Hill. But even in that battle the colonists had acquitted themselves well, and they gained confidence from it. The next eighteen months brought a string of defeats. Colonial soldiers quit in droves. Their paper money became so worthless many men lined their shoe's holes with it. The British drove Washington's men out of New York City and across New Jersey. Only by the superb advance work of his two youngest general officers, Henry Knox and Nathaniel Greene, for whom two southern Indiana counties are named, could the colonial soldiers round up all the boats in the area and flee across the Delaware River, leaving the British unable to follow—though their advance guards came close enough to see the colonials rowing across. The British could find nothing that floated left behind.

This first crossing of the Delaware happened in mid-December of 1776, a mere six months after the exultation of the Declaration. At year's end the enlistments of nearly one-third of Washington's army would expire. He believed they would all go home. They shivered in the cold. Everybody knew the British had just welcomed a fresh force of mercenaries, the Hessians, into their ranks. The colonials had seemingly lost. Washington knew that only some kind of desperate victory could turn the tide. He and his staff conceived an audacious plan. Banking on their knowledge of their English and German foes' expectation of a drunken Christmas holiday, on Christmas Eve they recrossed the Delaware under the cover of night and surprised them in their garrisons. The colonials routed their opponents that day, and followed

their victory with another at Princeton, six miles away, two days later. This decisive sequence changed the course of the Revolutionary War and of the world.

Writing from a home in Yardley, Pennsylvania at mid-day on December 23, 1776, George Washington told his wife, “We have come it seems to that moment when all resides on the toss of the dice. Either we shall prevail and continue the fight, or we shall be defeated. I take comfort in the knowledge that all I have done has followed from my obedience to the Almighty, as I am given the understanding of what that obedience requires.” Anybody who has read Ron Chernow’s brilliant biography of George Washington knows that he could not spell English. His thoughts were often labored and overly formal. Yet he had wisdom, and the courage to place his considerable estate on the line in a fight with his king. In other words, he had faith in the cause. We skeptical post-moderns abhor faith. It seems naïve, foolish, vulnerable. Yet God seems to work through people who believe.

Few of us face the do or die, win or lose situations of Abraham or Washington. Yet all of us do face the test: will we act in faith or in caution? Will we sign the document or slink away? Will we pledge our lives, our fortunes, our sacred honor? Or will we just try to stay in the comfort zone? God eventually revealed what Abraham’s decisions really meant. We already know—to the extent we allow ourselves to understand. Therefore, we must choose and take full responsibility for our choices. Trust God. God works through you.