

I'm no longer avoiding these Genesis stories. Many fear them – among Christians and Jews. They frighten children and adults. They've been painted by great artists i.e. Rembrandt causing us to look away. They've been read out of context, compromising the intent. They have led some to set aside the Bible all together and miss its story of profound love. But I also see now, we avoid these difficult stories to our peril. They are a wake-up call vital for our days of gun violence, invasions of countries, environmental crisis, loss of hope in the Holy Lands, danger for immigrants seeking safety,...

So I repeat Friday's eblast: *These texts are rightly heard when heard as God's urgent search for partners who will intently listen for God's radical love and who will respond risking all to follow God's love.*

I'm grateful to be a part of a listening community with you – where we treasure God's word as holy encounter for all who have ears to hear. These difficult stories show us God's urgency for human partners in furthering God's vision of boundless love? Is Abraham up for it? God wants to know. Are we up for it? God created and called it *good*. Nothing should be seen otherwise.

Episcopal bishop and Choctaw citizen Steve Charleston writes from his Native experience: *The suffering of my ancestors on the Trail of Tears embodied the condition of all humanity. They experienced what the whole tribe of humans experiences at one time or another: the struggle of life, the pain of oppression, the fear of the unknown. The Trail of Tears was a walk of every person who has known loneliness and fear. My ancestors walked with dignity because they had the hope of the Spirit within them.*

The hope of the Spirit is confidence that **no one** is outside God's love. Choctaw and other Natives knew their worth within. Otherwise, Charleston believes, they would have lost hope, given such treatment.

In Genesis 22 God tests Abraham to see if Abraham is up for embodying expansive love. It doesn't look good. He's just treated Hagar and Ishmael dreadfully. Can God rely on Abraham as the ancestor of faith grounded in love? God needs to know. Will Abraham listen expecting love is the way? Genesis 21 and 22 are bookends of the same message. In 21, Abraham and Sarah send Hagar and her only son Ishmael into grave danger. The story knows they won't survive without divine intervention.

Grave danger shapes Genesis 22 too – except it's Abraham and his only child – assuming his first born, Ishmael, hasn't survived. These chapters mirror each other. Both stories include a precious child. To treat one child as expendable and devalued puts all at risk. Value isn't reserved for a chosen few. Will Abraham live in radical trust of love's higher way?

This is a story of urgency! God hungers for human partners who believe obedience to God's ways matters. God is the one who shows us what love looks like when from our human perspective alone we can't figure it out. Love that emanates from God is never as simple as just loving one's own family, or tribe, or valued way of life.

If Abraham is to make the cut in God's search for a trustworthy leader, Abraham will need to show he expects God to intervene with love each time life will throw him a curveball. Life does that all the time – back then on down to today. Will Abraham see what love will do when curves are thrown? Will we? Life keeps throwing us balls we're not prepared for.

The good news is that God still speaks. Faith is the daily choice to listen again and afresh for a word from outside our limits. Isaiah 55 knows, "God's thoughts and ways are higher than ours." Living by faith is being open to the surprise of God's higher more thoughtful ways.

We say we're not into sacrificial systems anymore. We wouldn't harm a life! But we do. Look at the legacy of slavery in the United States, and our mounting deaths by gun violence. Alarming numbers of plants and animals are lost each year by our ignoring what's proven about pesticides. They kill pests quickly, but they also poison rats eaten by egrets and heron, owls and eagles. Their deaths are on us.

We know the science behind fracking, but if there's no harm to our habitat, we carry on. Reports are out now that firecrackers on the 4th disorient birds, frighten dogs and pollute air, but how we love the colors!

We're not unlike Abraham and Sarah whose legacy is weighed down by disregarding Hagar and Ishmael – forcing God to intervene. We're horrified by Abraham's blade in his assumed faithful hand. But at least Abraham stops short. He does not kill or harm his son. Today, harm is being done not only by weapons, but by legislation. LGBTQIA+ folk know well the harm done by condoning discrimination.

Genesis 21 and 22 are difficult stories, but they are instructive. I see why they remain important to Jews and Christians. God wants our attention. God's voice yearns to be heard. Does our listening equal Abraham's? He trusted God would intervene with a better way. "We" will come back he foretells (22:5).

God's mercies are deeper and higher than our human hearts see on our own. That's why we're called to listen for God's boundary-stretching word. "We live by every word that comes from the mouth of God. Our future is shaped for good or ill by whether or not we listen.

Abraham hears God telling him to do no harm. Abraham listened. How about us? Are we poised on the edge of our seats to do God's biddings?

LCM's Welcome Statement poises us for this – listening and living ready to reflect and represent God's expansive love. Thank you for sharing in this wide and wondrous adventure. *Read aloud:*

WELCOME STATEMENT

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We are an open and affirming congregation welcoming people of every race, cultural ethnicity, age, gender expression or identity, sexual orientation, physical and mental ability, socioeconomic position, family status, background, and wherever you are on your journey of faith. LCM invites you to join in our work of anti-racism, inclusivity, and social, economic, and environmental justice.