

SPEAKING THE UNSPEAKABLE

When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.

- Genesis 22:9-10

Storytelling is powerful. I remember hearing, when the preacher was particularly passionate in her/his unfolding of the narrative that made up his/her sermon, that those in whom the narrative had resonance, would shout, “tell the story.” This witnessing, this cosigning, as it were, is really the sounding of a chord struck within the heart of the listener. Something in that story unfolding from the pulpit is speaking life to the one doing all that talking back to the pulpit.

It is a quickening, a life-giving experience to hear your story told, even to hear a scene of your life echoing in the life-story of another. It is almost as if someone were peering into the window of your soul, elevating, making poetry of your secrets. Singing the secrets of your soul.

- Telling the story is to affirm the lived experience of folk with some shared history.
- Telling the story is to lift the common, the mundane to the level of the spiritual
- Telling the story is to bring into community those once isolated by the details of their lives.
- Telling the story is to restore those whose lives have been depleted, whose circumstances have syphoned off the force/fuel of their lives.
- Telling the story is to seek out and to settle the lost ones into a sense of belonging.
- Telling the story is to repair those formed by a myriad of wrongs
- Telling the story is to participate in making the wounded whole
- Telling the story is to raise up those murdered by transgressions.
- Telling the story is to instruct the hearer, to inform the listener
- Telling the story gives us the opportunity the see the world from the perspective of (an)other.
- Telling the story gives faith a vehicle, a means of transportation, a way to travel from one heart to another.
- Telling the story has the power to resuscitate
- Revive
- Regenerate
- Rejuvenate
- Revitalize

Telling the story has the power to resurrect, to bring people back to life from the silence of death, from the death of silence.

It is the unspoken-ness of tragedies of our lives that empower them to be perpetuated in the lives of others, our neighbors, our children. It is our silence, our unwillingness to speak about, to give voice to our tragedies that cause us to remain alone, apart from others, from family, from community. Telling the story is to

The poet Robert Pinsky in reviewing Kathryn Harrison’s book, “While The Slept: An Inquiry Into the Murder of a Family,” says that “the violations that destroy human lives, or maim them, seem to demand telling. Possibly we seek such stories as ways to understand our smaller, more ordinary losses and griefs.” Pinsky says that “literature...manifest[s] a profound hunger for narrating what is called, paradoxically, the unspeakable.” Such narratives bring to to our ears, to

our hearts, "...the unspeakable isolation of ruptured lives, and the reparative need to speak of that isolation... [Telling the story] brings moral clarity to the dark fate of a family: the daylight gaze of narrative itself as a form of empathy."^[1] And this is the certain power of story, to give the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. This is the power of speaking the unspeakable.

The Akedah, the binding of Isaac, is a horror story. Indeed, what else can it be? A young man bound by his own father and laid upon an altar of sacrifice to be bludgeoned to death, his blood let by his own father. Yes, when read from the perspective of Abraham, the akedah could be the story of faith, for one would draw certain conclusions when reading through Abraham: Abraham was a man of great faith. Abraham loved God more than the blessings of God. Abraham would suspend ethics and moral imperative to prove his love for God. Abraham, Abraham, Abraham. When read from Abraham's perspective, there are two major actors in this scene: Abraham and God. Who will regard the one being acted upon? Does not the bound one deserve to have a voice? I suggest that the bound one has to come to voice and that those, like us, with a history of bondage, are uniquely able and have a responsibility to articulate the experience of Isaac. We must read from the aspect, the perspective not of the actors but from the aspect of those acted upon. I suggest that as we read this passage from Isaac's perspective we will read out meaning relevant to our experience, we are likely to find the message of this passage that speaks life to us.

The Bible says that God put Abraham to the test. He said to him, "Abraham," and he answered, "Here I am."² And He said, "Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you."³ So early next morning, Abraham saddled his ass and took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. He split the wood for the burnt offering, and he set out for the place of which God had told him.⁴ On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place from afar.⁵ Then Abraham said to his servants, "You stay here with the ass. The boy and I will go up there; we will worship and we will return to you."

⁶ Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and put it on his son Isaac. He himself took the firestone and the knife; and the two walked off together.⁷ Then Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he answered, "Yes, my son." And he said, "Here are the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?"⁸ And Abraham said, "God will see to the sheep for His burnt offering, my son." And the two of them walked on together.

⁹ They arrived at the place of which God had told him. Abraham built an altar there; he laid out the wood; he bound his son Isaac; he laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.¹⁰ And Abraham picked up the knife to slay his son.¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord called to him from heaven: "Abraham! Abraham!" And he answered, "Here I am."¹² And he said, "Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me."¹³ When Abraham looked up, his eye fell upon a ram, caught in the thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son.¹⁴ And Abraham named that site Adonai-yireh, whence the present saying, "On the mount of the Lord there is vision."

Questions abound when reading this passage...

Here is a young man taken from his home by his father to go to high mountain to worship. This must not have been an unusual occurrence in their lives for the Bible recounts several instances in which Abraham built an altar to God prior to this. Abraham was a man who worshipped and

commemorated the blessings of God, the promises of God and the Presence of God. He followed the prescribed way of building altars and offering sacrifices to his God. Isaac, son of Abraham, favored member of this household must have been with his father for other occasions or, at the very least, have known of this worship practice. This is attested to by Isaac asking his father the whereabouts of the sheep for the sacrifice.

And so, Isaac is taken from his home by his father with two servants. These together travel about three days until they reach the place that God shows to Abraham. Abraham leaves the two servants with the donkey and their provisions while he and Isaac continue up the mountain to the site of worship. Abraham carried the firestone and the knife. But the young Isaac carries the wood that would become his burning bed. It is on the way that Isaac poses this heart wrenching question: "I see the firestone and I see the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering." Some suggest that Isaac may very well have known what was about to take place given that human sacrifice was practiced by peoples in this part of the world at the period in history. But his pain at realizing the terrifying potential of the moment made him appeal to his father, "Father, what's really going on here.... I see the firestone and I see the wood but where is the creature that will be sacrificed here?" Then Isaac heard these words from his father's lips, "God will see to the sheep for the burnt offering." And the two of them walked on together. This must have been among the most solemn of all processions. A young man, full of hopes, aspirations, dreams on his way to his death commanded by God at his father's hands. How could I be expendable? Why is my life not worth living? How could I be more meaningful death than in life? How is it that binding me creates value? How is it that immobilizing me makes me worth more than I am worth now? How is it that you would spend more to incarcerate me than to educate me? Was this the plan from the beginning or did you wait until you saw my fourth grade test scores to determine that this would be my fate? How did it happen that you could see your way clear to sacrifice me to ensure you received all you believe you have coming to you? God said it? God commanded this? You are therefore more important than I? My sacrifice, my blood becomes the fuel that drives the engine of your economy.

Aren't I worthy to have a future beyond this? Don't I have a right to be, to become? Are the views I have had toward the future pure fantasy? Am I not the son of promise? Is it not through me that God's plan for his people will come to fruition? Does mother know about this? Did even she approve of this?

And what about this God from whom you say you hear? Does He take joy in my suffering? Will He be pleased by this blood-letting? What price will my blood pay?

What have I done? What did I do to deserve this fate?

I wonder at what pace they walked. I wonder if the silence of their voices was deafening. I wonder how loudly the brush and fallen branches and debris crunched under their feet. I wonder if anxiety poured out of Isaac in rivers of sweat while he made his way up to the place of his binding. I wonder if his mouth grew dry and stank with the stench of fear. I wonder how many thoughts rushed through his mind. I wonder if the hysteria of this moment was when his sight began to fail? I wonder what he felt in his stomach while they walked along the way. I wonder if the weight of the wood became too much for him, there was no servant, no Simon to bear the load if his strength failed. And the Bible says that they walked on together.

When they arrived at the worship site, the Bible says that Abraham built an altar. He knew how to do this. He had done this many times before. He gathers stones that had not been cut by human hands and laid them painstakingly one on top of another until he had built an

elevated table on which he then spread out the wood that he had split before he left home days earlier. And then he bound Isaac.

How did Abraham bind Isaac? Did they wrestle? Did Isaac simply submit to his father? Did Isaac believe that God had commanded his death as a sacrifice? If he did, what is Isaac left to think about this God who commanded his death? He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar and stretched forth his hand to take the knife to kill him. Then the Angel of the Lord cried out from heaven, "Abraham, Abraham." And he answered, "Here I am." ¹² And he said, "Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me."

Yes, God did stay the execution but what about the sheer trauma of being bound and having a knife closing in at your throat? What is Isaac to do with the residue of such a horrible memory? How is he to live with post traumatic stress syndrome.

Isaac was witness to the inconsistencies and the contradictions that were his father. He had heard the stories told in the household of his father's great faith and his great failures. How could he now come to sacrifice Isaac. This man had demonstrated himself to be a champion of the innocent. In chapters 18 and 19 of Genesis, When God was investigating the sinfulness of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham bargains with God for the deliverance of the city on account of the innocent ones who lived there. He says, "will you destroy the innocent with the wicked?" And Abraham keeps taking chances with God on account of the innocent, so they would not be destroyed with the wicked. Yet, there were not ten righteous folk found in the city. How could this man, defender of the innocent, be the same man who gets up early in the morning to travel for three days to sacrifice his own son whom he loves? What has happened to this man? What is at stake here when the life of the innocent Isaac was on the line that was not at stake in Sodom and Gomorrah? What is the difference in these two scenes? Could Abraham have so longed for the blessings, the notoriety, the fame, the fortune that he would give up one beloved blessing as leverage for other blessings, for more blessings?

Well, this is a man who has given his wife Sarah into the hands of two kings, he has taken advantage of his wife's slave Hagar, he sanctions Sarah's abuse of Hagar, he banishes Hagar and his firstborn son and abandons them to death in the wilderness with a skin of water. He had experienced the loss of his brother, He had been witness to his mother's loathing and manipulation. How did he feel seeing his father send his brother away into the brutality of the wilderness? And now, he, in response to a test, or a trial, is willing to murder his own son. Isaac was already damaged before he got to Mount Moriah. This Abraham is a man who is completely focused on himself, his needs, his desires, his expectations, his requirements and his supposed promises. I, me, my. Egocentric man.

This seems ridiculous to us but how many children are given up for less? For partying? For nights of fun, drugs and alcohol? How many children are sacrificed so that parents can simply do what they want to do? How many children in the world are just given up because they are too much responsibility? Cost too much? Because there were just too many?

During adolescence, youth of all races and ethnicities become involved in violence, property crimes, and other delinquent behaviors, with only modest differences in the frequency and severity of their lawbreaking. Specifically, confidential youth surveys show that compared with white youth, African-American teens commit slightly more violent crime (36 percent versus 25 percent of boys commit at least one violent offense by age 17),⁵⁰ about the same amount

of property crime, and less drug crime.⁵¹ Yet African-American youth are arrested at dramatically higher rates than white youth for all types of crime and, once arrested, they are...

- more likely to be detained;
- more likely to be formally charged in juvenile court;
- more likely to be placed into a locked correctional facility (and less likely to receive probation), once adjudicated;
- more likely to be waived to adult court; and
- more likely to be incarcerated in an adult prison, once waived to adult court.⁵²[\[2\]](#)

500,000 children in Foster Care in this country are waiting for permanence.

Furthermore, many studies have documented that the outlook for foster youth who age out is often grim:

- One in four will be incarcerated within the first two years after they leave the system.
- Over one-fifth will become homeless at some time after age 18.³
- Approximately 58 percent had a high school degree at age 19, compared to 87 percent of a national comparison group of non-foster youth.⁴
- Of youth who aged out of foster care and are over the age of 25, less than 3 percent earned their college degrees⁵, compared with 28 percent of the general population.⁶ [\[3\]](#)

How long would society tolerate continued adherence to ill-conceived policies and discredited practices if the majority of the juvenile justice caseloads were not poor youth of color?

The akedah, the binding of Isaac. This is how this horror story must necessarily be named. Isaac is not sacrificed, Isaac is bound. Bound. The text is silent on how, or even whether, Isaac is loosed. This image, I believe is instructive for us as we think deeply about the impact this binding and near filicide had on Isaac and has on Isaacs up to this very day. Does one become free from the memory of a parent tying and fully intending to kill him? Does one become free from the feeling that s/he is expendable? Does one ever get loosed from the notion that they are worth more dead than alive? Does one ever recover from being bound?

There are effects, sisters and brothers. Yes, there is a ram in the bush. Yes, Abraham does name the mountain Adonai-yireh. But Isaac is still bound. Isaac does not walk back down from the site of his binding with his father. Isaac is silent. Isaac loses his voice. Isaac was a man left utterly devastated. Isaac was a cipher, he was left, it seems with no will of his own. He had done the bidding of his father and kept his life but lost his soul. It was he whose eyesight became so dim that he could not tell the difference between his twin sons. It was he who would seem to be completely oblivious to the rivalry that seethed between the two boys. It was he who was tricked by his wife.

No one left this binding unscathed. Abraham returns to live in Beersheba, the location that marks the region where Hagar and Ishmael wandered before settling in Paran as well as the region from which Abraham went forth to the mountain with Isaac. Meanwhile, Sarah has moved to Hebron. Isaac and his father never speak again. God and Abraham never again talk to each other. "Perhaps these characters dare not speak among themselves after participating in so terrifying and event of near sacrifice." What are they really going to discuss? There will be no meaningless idle chit-chat among this company.

This family is broken. They are relegated to silence. There is complete isolation, there is no healing, there are no reparations, there is no restitution and they only get together for funerals. So, this presents us with opportunities. To tell the story. To speak the unspeakable horrors to which we have been victims, to which we have been witness, of which we have been

guilty.

- to restore those whose lives have been depleted, whose circumstances have syphoned off the force/fuel of their lives.
- to seek out and to settle the lost ones into a sense of belonging.
- to repair those damaged by a myriad of wrongs
- to participate in making the wounded whole
- to raise up those murdered by transgressions.
- to instruct the hearer, to inform the listener
- to see the world from the perspective of (an)other.
- to resurrect, to bring people back to life from the silence of death, from the death of silence.

For in so doing we open our eyes to the vision of God for His people, to see God's vision for (an)other way.

[1] "Speaking the Unspeakable" Robert Pinsky in the NYTimes Book Review. June 8, 2008

[2] http://www.kidscount.org/datacenter/db_08pdf/2008_essay.pdf

[3]

http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Foster_care_reform/Kids_are_Waiting_TimeforReform0307.pdf