“A Ram in the Thicket”

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Dr. Rick Axtell
College Chaplain and Paul L. Cantrell Associate Professor of Religion


Abraham showed up at Centre unceremoniously on August 24—twelve feet tall, noble and bronzed, reading a book. After his journey here, tied up in the back of a truck, he was secured upon his pedestal, wrapped in red white and blue, and bound with ropes.

Two days later, after Opening Convo, we gathered in front of Crounse for an unveiling which almost strangled him! After a few awkward moments he was emancipated from the red, white, and blue. We applauded and dispersed to begin the year that put Centre in the national spotlight.

Ed Hamilton’s Lincoln sculpture quickly became an iconic Centre image. The photo of Lincoln with his VIP credentials became one of the most popular tweets of the debate season.

Lincoln’s statue has had a different effect on campus than the Flame, not having inspired the confident and courageous among us to dash toward his bronzed feet emancipated from the shackles of proper clothing.

Instead, you quickly created the practice of placing pennies at his feet to ensure good luck on exams. It has not been lost on your faculty that this reflects a problematic understanding of the inscription at the base of the statue—“I will study, and be ready.”

Facilities Management is collecting those pennies for a library book fund—a fitting corrective gesture. Because focused time with books was really all the luck you needed to get to this momentous day.

The monumental new piece on Centre’s campus is larger than life, as is our image of this, our Abraham, the Great Emancipator.

This morning I want to talk about two Abrahams that are part of our shared heritage, because together, the two might have something significant to teach us on the day of your graduation.

The story of the other Abraham is canonized in the sacred writings of western civilization’s three great religious traditions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

And the most troubling part of his story is the Akedah, the binding of his son, Isaac—the divine command to an ancient patriarch to perform a human sacrifice. The story’s meaning
is contested within and between the three religions. But this foundational narrative is fixed in our collective memory.

In HUM 120, you studied the bronze reliefs of the Sacrifice of Isaac submitted by Brunelleschi and Ghiberti for the doors of the Florence Baptistry at the turn of the 15th century (which Helen Emmitt assures me you will remember…). Some of you saw them more recently in Florence with Dr. Paskewich. So you’ll be well prepared, because right after Baccalaureate, Dr. Emmitt will be asking everyone to identify the slides as a condition for graduation, that you, too, may enter the Gates of Paradise.

These famous bronzes depict a remarkable story. Abraham is the wanderer whose sojourn beyond the land of his kindred is the archetype of an individual who moves beyond fate and ventures into the unknown. He journeys—propelled forward toward something new, a destiny.

For Abraham is the follower of the Promise. It is the promise of a great nation, with many descendants. And in Genesis, Isaac is the hope for fulfillment of that promise. His name means “laughter.” Isaac is the laughter of faith in the face of impossibility.

But now, the laughter shall end. This God commands:

“Take your son, Isaac, whom you love, … and offer him… as a burnt offering….”

Isaac, whom you love!
It is among the Bible’s most horrifying stories. The prose in Genesis is sparse:

So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey. … Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife.

So the two of them walked on together.

What must have been going through Abraham’s mind, as they walked together? No parent sitting here today can imagine the anguish, the anxiety, the terrible dilemma of this unreasonable, unbearable conflict between love for one’s child and obedience to a God.

And Isaac carrying the wood! In the Hebrew story, even when they get to Mt. Moriah, Isaac suspects nothing. His innocence is heartbreaking:

Isaac said to his father Abraham…, “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham said, “God will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.”

So the two of them walked on together.

The text repeats this last phrase. It is heart-wrenching.

Finally, Isaac is bound; placed on the altar. He knows. His world changes forever.
What passed between them in that moment? Was there a last look into the anguished, determined, inscrutable eyes of his father?

Imagine it:
The arm extended.
The knife suspended in the mountain air.
The ethical suspended in a pivotal moment of fear and trembling.

And then that moment… Another voice! Abraham hesitates. He questions. He is no longer certain. Whose voice? He looks over his shoulder, wild-eyed. He listens. Now Isaac is panicked, unable to breathe, feverish… And then! The bleating of a ram in the thicket! Abraham lowers the knife. He listens. He sees the ram tangled in the brush. There is an alternative. Abraham chooses. There is another way.

When the alternative sacrifice is offered, Abraham returns down the mountain with two servants. There is no mention of Isaac.

What was it like for this son to walk down that mountainside, now alone, traumatized, forsaken, no longer innocent? The damage had been done.

In the ancestral narratives that follow, Isaac remains the silent ancestor, almost invisible. He is not so much the subject of his own story as the object of someone else's story.

This is the genesis of tragedy. Isaac is the tragedy of Genesis.

How is this story to be interpreted?

Of course, on one level, the story legitimates the sacrificial cult of the temple priesthood, firmly established by the time the ancestral legends took written form.

Some also see it as a polemic against the human sacrifice so common in the ancient near eastern context. In the developing morality of these Bronze Age peoples, this story may signal a progression away from the practice of offering the firstborn son. People of the Book are not to be people who engage in human sacrifice. It does not have to be this way. There is an alternative. There is a ram in the thicket.

But the standard interpretation is that Abraham models exemplary faith. He passes a test of loyalty through absolute obedience, a willingness to go through with even so hideous an act, out of allegiance to his God. The Sunday school lesson is that he is the model of faith.

In the Islamic version the son is also the model of faith, understood as perfect submission to the will of God. The text never names him, so the tradition differs on which son it was. But in the Qur’an, Abraham tells his son of the divine command. The son knows and willingly submits. Here, too, it is a story of faith as absolute obedience.
Now, such readings that spiritualize the story as a model of courageous faith may make it palatable if we gloss over what’s really going on here, if we sanitize the narrative and strip it of its human elements, if we accept the storytellers’ assurance that Abraham’s God commanded him to slaughter his son.

Well, Abraham may be a product of his time, but we moderns can’t help but read this passage with a fear and trembling that troubles us to our core.

For this ancient text of terror cannot be abstracted from our modern world of terror.

After Auschwitz, who can be comfortable with any defense of Abraham that sounds like the Nuremberg defense of German Christians: “I was only obeying orders”?

After the horror of 9/11, who can affirm the willingness to kill in obedience to a divine mandate?

We wonder, like interpreters from medieval Spanish rabbis to Immanuel Kant to Elie Wiesel: Was this really the voice of God?

And so I ask, where is the divine voice to be found today?

Today, the divine voice is heard in the trembling cry of Isaac.  
It summons us anew from the camps at Auschwitz.  
It calls from the refugee tents of Haiti and Syria.

You see, in the searing light of our modern age, we must read this story differently—from the perspective of Isaac—for this story is still our story.

Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel pictures Isaac looking into this father’s eyes—a moment when “all creation held its breath.” He says, in that awful moment “Isaac understood that what was happening to him would happen to others, that this was to be a tale without end, an experience to be endured by his children and theirs.”

To see the world from the perspective of Isaac, rather than Abraham, is to know a deeper truth about this passage: It is the story of the bound one, the victim sacrificed on the altars of any age.

Class of 2013, on this day as you look toward the future you will build and the world you will repair, we must face this truth: Isaac is still bound. Altars are still being assembled.

You will be called upon to ask a crucial question: Is there a ram in the thicket? Is there another way?

The question brings me back to “our” Abraham. Back to Lincoln.

On Lincoln’s birthday this year, we emerged from Crounse to find giant footprints proceeding from the Great Emancipator’s statue. Step by step, the footprints led down the sidewalk to the back of a truck parked on the street outside Cowan.
And inside that truck were human beings, bound, gagged, crowded into the back of a U-Haul.

You see, 150 years after Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, slavery still thrives. *Slavery.*

On the side of the truck were statistics about human trafficking:

- 20 million people are currently enslaved.
- Over half a million people are trafficked across borders annually, for a profit of $32 billion a year.
- Human trafficking is now favored by organized crime because, unlike drugs or guns, human beings can be sold again and again and again.

If you looked into that truck, that was the day you unveiled our Lincoln, untangling him from the red, white, and blue, to remind us of the call to unbind every Isaac, every suffering one sacrificed on the altar of profit, or convention, or nationalism, or religion…

*It does not have to be this way. There is a ram in the thicket.*

So hundreds of you followed those giant footsteps and wrote letters that helped Kentucky pass a human trafficking bill this March.† That legislation is now part of the Centre narrative. A small strap of Isaac’s binding, loosened. Perhaps you will be the generation that abolishes slavery once and for all!

The altars of our modern sacrificial system have seldom been unveiled with more clarity than last month in Bangladesh. On April 24, 1,127 human beings perished when an unsafe building collapsed upon thousands of garment workers.‡ These are (were) the people who make our clothes.

Why? Because they are paid only $38 a month. Low wages and minimal regulation are precisely what attract retailers to labor markets like Bangladesh.

These factories operate on the slimmest profit margins to survive the competitive world of outsourcing for corporate retailers. So their workers barely survive on what amounts to slave wages.§

*We* are the ones who reap what they sew, importing 97% of what we wear, much of it from cheap labor markets like Bangladesh, Cambodia, Haiti, and Nicaragua. Yet, in real dollars, what we pay for apparel has fallen 39% just in your lifetime.¶

The poorest people on earth, risking their lives in unsafe working conditions to make the cheap t-shirts we demand…

What happened last month is not new: A factory fire killed 112 Bangladeshi workers last year, not long after 260 garment workers died in a fire in Pakistan.**
Burnt offerings on the altar of consumer demand…

It doesn’t have to be this way.
There is a ram in the thicket.
We are not powerless to change this system.

Already public pressure has created a new Fire and Building Safety Agreement that establishes a mechanism for corporations supplied by factories in Bangladesh to pay for safety improvements.\textsuperscript{xix}

You see, as a group of garment workers told us on a study abroad visit in Nicaragua, workers don’t want us to boycott irresponsible brands. They want us to exert consumer pressure to ensure that corporations are no longer willing to sacrifice people on the altar of profit.\textsuperscript{xx}

So members of this graduating class have worked hard to educate our community on the labor conditions of those who sew our clothes and those who harvest our food. This work is the thread that strengthens the fabric of a global community and the seed that will yield a harvest of justice.

You see, the story of Abraham and Isaac reminds us of the perils of acting without questioning, as if there are no alternatives to the conventional ways of doing things.

There is a ram in the thicket—a previously unseen pathway to moral choices that can liberate we who are chained to habit and those our habits may put in chains. But it’s up to us to pay attention, to examine the alternatives, to think critically and creatively.

The liberal arts education you celebrate today taught you to examine the many sides of any argument, to beware of the absolute certainty, or unexamined convention, that can lead us to act without the conscientious pause.\textsuperscript{xxi}

We hope it has also taught you humility in the face of complexity and mystery. For today we know the perils of absolute truth claims, of blind obedience in a world of black and white, of Abraham’s walk up that mountain with unhesitating certainty.

Now, I must admit that having just graded some of the papers with which you advanced to this moment, I am newly aware that absolute certainty is not the plague with which some of you have been afflicted!

But even the debate that took place on this stage reminded us that our political system itself is polarized and paralyzed by the fixed certainties of entrenched positions.

It will be up to you to imagine a better way.

The Centre ethos has also taught you to pay attention to Isaac, with empathy. And you have worked to unbind him wherever the invisible one cries out for attention.
In the victims of Birmingham’s tornado whose homes you cleaned up, and in the residents of West Virginia’s mountains whose homes you restored.

In the faces of the children you taught in Costa Rica and Ghana, or the immigrant children you tutored at the Warehouse.

There is a village in the hills of Cameroon whose health clinic now has a well because of your help.

And just as Lincoln received his first law books from a Centre graduate, the bookshelves your class built and stocked for residents of local Habitat houses may lead to emancipations you never imagined.

You have written it into the Centre narrative: There is a ram in the thicket!

Perhaps this is the innovative genius of the Abraham story—his surprising openness to an alternative.

For faith is an “audacious openness” to a new way.xiii Far from blind obedience, faith imagines—and thereby fulfills the ever-unfolding vision of freedom toward which the Promise points.

In Pakistan, a 15 year-old girl named Malala Yousufzai became a champion for the value of education for girls and women. On a BBC blog, she chronicled her life in Pakistan where the Taliban banned education for females and blew up girls’ schools. As an advocate for universal education, Malala is determined not to let the Taliban prevent her from realizing her dream—to “study, and be ready.”

Two days before Centre’s debate, a gunman boarded a school bus in Pakistan and shot Malala, as a lesson to anyone advocating education for girls.xiii

These militants, fueled by the absolute certainty of their version of religious law, insist that girls should not get an education. But Malala survived, and reminds us that even in a war on terror that has sacrificed so many on every side, there is a ram in the thicket.

“If children aren’t given pens,” she says, “it’s more likely a terrorist will be able to give them guns.”

In a world where 60 million school-age children are not getting an education, this Muslim girl is fighting terror by uprooting the hopelessness it feeds upon. Education emancipates.

Class of 2013, there is a dream of Isaac unbound, walking free, and in spite of everything, laughing.xiv Imagine it!

Now, if you saw Life of Pi, you may know what I’ll ask next:

Which narrative do you prefer?
The narrative of binding or the narrative of emancipation?
The conventions of culture and nation and economics, or the ram in the thicket?

I think I know which narrative you prefer. For today, you will be graduates of Centre College.\textsuperscript{xxv}

“And so it goes with God.”

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\textsuperscript{1} The story of the binding of Isaac is liturgically enacted by Jews on Rosh Hashanah and Muslims on Eid al-Adha. Christians who interpret the story typologically see it as prefiguring what they commemorate on Good Friday.


\textsuperscript{3} Kierkegaard discusses the sacrifice of Isaac as “the teleological suspension of the ethical” in Fear and Trembling. Elie Wiesel sees this moment as “that precise point where despair and faith were to meet in a fiery and senseless quest.” The Sacrifice of Isaac: A Survivor’s Story, in Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends, 100.

\textsuperscript{4} Some commentators note that the original narrative may have completed the sacrifice, arguing that the angel’s voice that stays Abraham’s hand is Yahwistic in an otherwise Elohist text. In 22:19, Abraham returns without Isaac. There is no more dialogue between father and son in the text. After Abraham’s death, Isaac again meets Ishmael, the other son Abraham almost sacrificed, this time to the desert.

\textsuperscript{5} In Genesis, Isaac seems merely a connector between the great cycles of Abraham and Jacob. In fact, the divine promise is pronounced directly to his father, Abraham, and directly to his son, Jacob, but only indirectly to Isaac, who is blessed because his father was great (Genesis 26: 1-5, 23-24).

\textsuperscript{6} “The living remains alive, thus marking the end of an era of ritual murder” (Wiesel, 91). Without this, Wiesel notes, Israel would not have been born (88).

\textsuperscript{7} Some have seen the story as Abraham’s testing of God, for if God allowed the sacrifice, this God’s promise could not be trusted. It is also seen as a test of whether this God can remain passive and silent in the face of this horror. But the sense of the text in both Bible and Qur’an is that Abraham is the one being tested.

\textsuperscript{8} The majority position in Islam is that the son bound for sacrifice was Ishmael.

\textsuperscript{9} Troels Nørager, Taking Leave of Abraham: An Essay on Religion and Democracy (Aarhus Univ. Press, 2008), 11.

\textsuperscript{10} Wiesel, 87.

\textsuperscript{11} See Caravaggio’s painting of the scene, which captures the dread, the fear, and the anguish of the victim.


\textsuperscript{xxvi} Wiesel highlights Midrashic interpretations that question “whether the miracle could happen again” (88).

\textsuperscript{xxvii} HB3 aids victims of human trafficking in Kentucky, increases financial penalties, and creates a fund to help victims and to finance prosecution. It passed the Kentucky legislature in March, 2013.

\textsuperscript{xxiv} Factory owners refused to suspend work after cracks were reported. Julhas Alam and Al-Emrun Garjon, Managers ignored evacuation order, Courier Journal, 4/26/13. The building owner, who had added three illegal floors to the eight-story structure, has been arrested. Farid Hossain and Julhas Alam, Official: Disaster was not ‘really serious’, Courier Journal, 5/4/13.

\textsuperscript{xxv} In the $3 trillion fashion industry, Bangladesh is the number two exporter, selling 7 billion garments annually to western brands, earning $18-20 billion a year. Bangladesh’s Bloody Clothes, Editorial on Bloomberg View, in Courier Journal, 5/3/13.

\textsuperscript{xxviii} Since 1994. Figure from Boston College sociology professor Juliet Schor, cited in Richard Greenwald and Michael Hirsch, Rana Tragedy is a wake-up call, Courier Journal, 5/13/13.

\textsuperscript{xxvii} Hossain and Alam, 5/4/13.

\textsuperscript{xxvii} As of 5/15/13, Benetton, Calvin Klein, Tommy Hilfiger, Izod, Zara and numerous European retailers have signed. Wal-Mart, the second largest buyer in Bangladesh, and Gap, have not.
The Worker Rights Consortium monitors labor conditions and provides information to members who sign on to their code of conduct to help consumers make informed decisions about the labor conditions.

Khaled Abou Fadl’s phrase. He explains: “God wishes human beings to search and seek for the Divine Will. Truth adheres to search—the search itself is ultimate truth… Everyone … is functioning in the realm of the possible and probable… To claim full or perfect knowledge of God’s will is to challenge the singularity and uniqueness of the Divine perfection.” Quoted in Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad* (Oxford, Oneworld: 2006), 200-201. The habit of reflective awareness must be *cultivated*, even as it was by desert ancients who knew the discipline of sacred silence. In an era when we are so connected to everything, paying focused attention to anything may be our greatest challenge.

Within religion’s deepest impulses are the seeds of the alternative that will replace religion’s perversion of itself. Wiesel rejects Kierkegaard’s interpretation of the first movement of faith as resignation: “God does not like man to come to him through resignation. Man must strive to reach God through knowledge and love” (104). Compare Job’s questioning protest and his resultant encounter with the Divine mystery.

Pakistani Muslim clerics issued a fatwa condemning the act, for this is not their Islam.

Isaac, the first survivor, is marked and haunted, yet “in spite of everything, he did laugh” (Wiesel, 110).

Perhaps one day there will also be a statue on our campus honoring the example of John Marshall Harlan, who graduated from Centre in 1850. The “Great Dissenter” on the Supreme Court, he stood alone on the side of “Isaac,” rejecting the Court’s “Separate but Equal” doctrine in *Plessy v. Ferguson.*