It’s an ordinary day in late summer. I am four years old and about to start kindergarten. Out of nowhere my mum gets a call from God, one she cannot ignore. It pulls her to her knees, weeping. The message, unmistakable and clear, is that she must not let me celebrate Hallowe’en. This strikes her as strange. She has always enjoyed parties and has thrown rather lavish ones in the past for my three brothers and their friends. Ones with haunted shacks and hayrides. A moment later the phone rings. It is a parent from the school I am about to attend, one who has been tasked with organizing parties for the class. She asks Mum to organize the Hallowe’en party. Shaking a bit, Mum says no.

I have always puzzled over this strange moment that set me a little bit apart from the other children. Mum assumed that it must have something to do with Halloween itself. But that didn’t explain why this message was just for me. I wondered, later, if there was something wrong with me, some proclivity for evil. I wonder now if that might have been a missed opportunity for Mum to notice something else about me. If her curiosity had turned toward what was right in front of her instead of toward some abstract concept of good and evil, she might have seen a child who had recently experienced trauma, who might have found Hallowe’en too frightening just then. I was, after all, a fearful child. There’s no way to know that for certain. What had happened to me was a secret I was compelled to keep, first from fear and later from shame. She didn’t know. But still I wonder.

In the scripture reading today, Abraham is apparently given a grisly and devastating command. Sacrifice your beloved son. Why would God ask such a thing? How could Abraham comply?

A number of other questions went through my mind when I was pondering this passage. One was, hadn’t he already sacrificed his first born son, Ishmael, and the boy’s mother, a slave named Hagar, to the desert? The pair survived only because God “opened Hagar’s eyes” to find a hidden well of water. I also wondered how many people knew of Abraham’s intention to sacrifice his son. Did Sarah know? Sylvie Kazan has written a Jewish feminist Midrash for this story. Midrashim are commentaries, interpretations and non-canonical stories offering context or bringing new perspectives to passages from the Torah. In this particular Midrash, Sarah cries out to God to stop Abraham from killing their son, and in answer to her prayer, God provides the ram in the thicket. While I like this story, it makes more sense to me that no one knows but Abraham. Sarah was a strong enough person in her own right that I think she might have prevented it had she known. After all, it was her own quarrel with Hagar that banished the slave woman and her son. And besides this, it is something Abraham did alone. In secret. Secrets are dangerous things. Ask any survivor of abuse. I always have told my children to be wary of any adult who expects you to keep a secret.

Stories, and the ways we tell them, are fundamental to who we are, as groups and as individuals. The key lessons of this story have been underlined and repeated within the passage itself. One lesson is about God’s provision. God will provide. Even as they are taking the terrible walk together up the mountainside Abraham half-lies to his son but unknowingly speaks the whole truth, “God will provide.” I wonder if complete trust in God’s provision could eliminate any sense that negotiations and sacrifices are necessary in the first place.

Can you imagine the feelings and thoughts that must be going through Abraham’s mind as he walks up the mountain with his son? A boy who is already old and strong enough to carry the wood for the sacrifice. I’m sure he would be remembering every moment he has spent playing with him or teaching him things he will need to know as he grows into an adult. Did he already have plans, even then, to sacrifice him? It was a common enough practice at the time, sacrificing children to curry favour with the gods. Surely not though. For he has placed all his hopes in him growing up to provide children and grandchildren. How do the servants feel watching them leave together? They must know his intention, for, even as the boy points out, there is no animal to sacrifice. Do any of them hesitate, wonder if they could intervene at this point? Or is the gap between servant and master too deep? Or do they even hope some of the power generated by this sacrifice might somehow benefit them as well? Then, turn your imagination toward the child himself. Could he ever trust his father again? Could he ever trust anyone?

Child sacrifice was a practice that continued on after Abraham. One recorded instance involved a judge or ruler named Jephthah, who promised, in exchange for a military victory against the Ammonites, to sacrifice whatever came from his house to greet him. His daughter, an only child, came out of the house dancing upon his arrival and he tore his clothes crying, “Oh no, my daughter! You have brought me down and I am devastated. I have made a vow to the Lord that I cannot break.” She accepts that she must die but asks for two months to spend with her friends. Remember how long two months feels to a child? The two months of summer holidays? Here it is much more clear that it is not God who tells Jephthah to sacrifice his daughter, but Jephthah who bargains in this way with God. It was his victory in battle that he then interprets as God’s answer, God’s part in this transaction. How often do decisions rashly made in moments of fear bear horrible consequences? What does it mean to fear God? What is the lesson of this story? Collateral damage, as they callously call it in instances of war? A need to harden onesself beyond recognition if one is to lead nations in war? World War I poet Wilfred Owen retells the story of Abraham and Isaac within his own context and ends it with:

“...an angel called him out of heaven,  
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,  
Neither do anything to him. Behold,  
A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;  
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.

But the old man would not so, but slew his son,  
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

Pride. Abraham’s relationship with God is, in his perspective, unique, and something that sets him apart and makes him special. And, ultimately, from this origin story would come not one, but two nations of people, and not one but three religious traditions. Muslims, Jews and Christians all claim Abraham. It makes sense that he is proud. He has to carry some degree of pride or at least great confidence to make the choices he makes to strike out with his family and servants on a circuitous and multigenerational journey that relies nearly exclusively on his sense of blessedness and spiritual intuition. As the first Hebrew, it also makes sense that he is a bit lonely. What Wiccans call a solitary practitioner. To whom is he truly accountable other than his personal experience or relationship with God? It would be difficult for him, though perhaps not impossible, to discern collectively the best course of action as Mennonites are inclined to do. Abraham believes he has only his own understanding of God to rely on. But he also has a wife, servants and several others in his household whose opinions he apparently does not value as highly as his own, or with whom he doesn’t feel the need to consult in lofty matters such as this. The intuitive understanding he holds of the will of God, while apparently considerable, has both strengths and weaknesses. Because he still has to pass his promptings of the spirit through the lens he has of the world. A world where terrible things are done in the names of gods, then and now. And the more isolated a person is or feels when they have to make decisions based on intuition, the greater the probability of human error.

In the gospel of Mark, when Jesus is asked what is the most important commandment, he says to love God with all your soul, mind and strength and to love your neighbour as yourself. Every action we take, every decision we make in the name of God needs to pass through the command to love your neighbour. Ultimately, love wins the day in the story of Abraham and Isaac. I think a key phrase is the one that is repeated twice. Abraham answers “Here I am.” At the last minute, Abraham has the presence of mind and fullness of heart to make it possible to rethink his terrible decision. He is able to release the tight control of his own narrative long enough to listen and be corrected, to be redirected, by the spirit and presence, the now-ness of God. He leaves just enough space for the spirit of love to intercede. It’s clear that God does not want him to kill his son. Of course Abraham leaves with a new narrative of his own faithfulness and willingness to offer everything without actually offering everything. He can have his cake and eat it too. This action undoubtedly leads to and continues through the practice, even in Jesus’s childhood, of ritually offering one’s firstborn child at the temple but then offering an animal sacrifice in lieu of the child. We at least know this: that the practice of child sacrifice became largely frowned upon after that day. According to the author of Ezekiel “The Sovereign says…When you offer your gifts—the sacrifice of your children in the fire—you continue to defile yourselves.” And from Jeremiah: ‘The people of Judah have done evil in my eyes, …**31** They have built the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire—something I did not command, nor did it enter my mind.”

And yet it continued even so. And, in some sense, still continues. The spiritual abuse of children could be considered an example of child sacrifice. Spiritual abuse has been defined as “any attempt to exert power and control over someone using religion, faith, or beliefs.” and “Spiritual abuse happens when someone uses spiritual or religious beliefs to hurt, scare or control you.” When I read these definitions I immediately thought of the systemic spiritual abuse that formed the foundation of residential schools. Spiritual abuse is so insidious that the victim may not even know it is happening to them. Like Isaac, they may even find themselves carrying the wood for the sacrifice. Some of you may be survivors of spiritual abuse. Know that what happened to you was wrong. You did not deserve it. Any more than Isaac deserved to be laid out on that altar.

Stories can help us understand ourselves and each other. We can identify with characters in bible stories and either feel validated or instructed to not make similar mistakes ourselves. In addition to the stories there is something else available to us, something more immediate: The author of Hebrews writes: “Therefore, we also, who have all of these who surround us like clouds, let us throw off from us all the weights of the sin which is always ready for us, and let us run with patience this race that is set for us.” As well as our living companions on our journey of faith, we also have those who have gone before. I’m not proud to say it, but I behave differently when people are watching me. Abraham moves away from watchful eyes when he intends to sacrifice his son. The benefit of having a cloud, something above, around and within us, that watches, that knows, is hard to calculate. When I reflect for a moment on those I have known and loved or even have heard about and loved or respected across time and space from the stories told about them; when I think about everyone who has died and who has passed on to that other realm and is watching me now, it is overwhelming, comforting and even at times disconcerting. We are held accountable by those who have gone before us but are still, in some sense, with us on this journey through life, a journey that we may even experience as a race sometimes because of how time flies through and past us on the way and because of how arduous and exhausting it can feel. I like the word cloud in this context. There are no sharp edges to a cloud. And they can carry a lot of water, a lot of tears. Clouds care equally for the victim and the perpetrator, for according to the gospel of Matthew, their rain falls on the just and unjust. And indeed we know, as do they, that many perpetrators were themselves victims.

This is what I take from this story: none of us, however spirit filled or however close to God we imagine ourselves to be, are exempt from the inevitability of human error. God speaks to us, I don’t doubt that at all, but we often misinterpret what God plants in our hearts when we try to harvest it with our minds. It has always been useful to invite our neighbours to help with the harvest. As for putting God first, I can’t believe God is so linear and divisible. How can you put God anywhere but where they are, that is, everywhere: within everyone and everything. Honouring God means loving and honouring our neighbour, friend, child, parent, sibling, even our enemy. To sacrifice any of God’s children is to sacrifice God themself. We do not need to struggle alone. Others can help with accountability and discernment. Prophets like Those I’ve quoted: Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and unnamed multitudes. Clouds of those who would guide us, teach us, root for us when we are full of fear or unsure how to move forward. And through their guidance we can begin to learn how to forget that it’s impossible and simply climb the mountain, without anything but our love for each other, and know that God will provide.