

## Sermon for Sunday, Feb. 21, 2021

### First Reading: Genesis 22:1–18 -- The Sacrifice of Isaac

**22** After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” **2** He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.” **3** So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. **4** On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. **5** Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy<sup>[a]</sup> will go over there and worship and come again to you.” **6** And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. **7** And Isaac said to his father Abraham, “My father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” **8** Abraham said, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So they went both of them together.

**9** When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. **10** Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. **11** But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” **12** He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” **13** And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. **14** So Abraham called the name of that place, “The Lord will provide”;<sup>[b]</sup> as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.”<sup>[c]</sup>

**15** And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven **16** and said, “By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, **17** I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his<sup>[d]</sup> enemies, **18** and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.”

The Gospel lesson for today (Mark 1:9–15) is about nine sentences, not very long at all and when I read it, I said, Oh, there's a challenge there. Then I read the Old Testament and said there's a story there. And I'd much rather preach on a story. And I really got into the story.

Abraham (which means father of nations) was a father only to Isaac (and Ishmael) at this point. (You can read about God's promise to him in Genesis 17.) So what is this test all about? It certainly sounds cruel by our standards today. God says, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, to the land of Mariah and offer him there as a burnt offering." You may conclude the God we see here in the story is pretty messed up, demanding a blood sacrifice, the wholesale murder of Abraham's son at his own hands. It's not a funny joke. I went looking on the internet. I wanted to see what the reaction of our culture is to this story, and one Reddit writer says this: "What kind of manipulative, sick, twisted, disturbing and grossly abusive parent would ever require a test of this magnitude, just to test your child? That's not a god I ever want to know. Really, this is a Bible story you want to tell your children?!"

We find reactions to the Bible like that all the time from the world. But are they wrong?

"Abraham rises early in the morning..." I never noticed that before. That means that Abraham had the entire night to wrestle with the situation, to back out even.

One thing that you are never going to get in this story, though, is a detailed description of any of the thoughts that go through any of the characters' minds. You are not going to get to know their inner dialogue. Sorry. It's a story, plain and simple. A story so plain and simple you don't really think about the horror of it until you really put yourself in the situation that Abraham was given.

So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar.

When I first learned to translate Hebrew this is the text I was given to translate. And I thought I found something so brilliant. In English, we're used to verb tenses like past, present, or future. But in Hebrew, there's like eight different verb tenses; it gets really complicated, with active tenses and passive tenses and all of these things. And it changes the meaning of the word. And the root word here is the word CUT, Abraham cut the wood. But it's not a normal verb tense, but a special one that would say that what he did was *intensive action*. He didn't just cut the wood, he cut the heck out of the wood. He chopped the wood, he intensively beat up the wood. And I'm thinking "oh here's my insight into Abraham's emotional state. He's taking out his aggression and his emotion on the wood, right?"

My professor said, no, the word cut is always intensive. You don't just cut wood, you have to chop it. So it really doesn't tell us anything about Abraham's emotional state.

One thing you *can* do is listen to the words that are being used: "on the third day." You can't miss the foreshadowing. The whole story is foreshadowing Christ. And the language used here is the same language that is going to be used in the crucifixion, when God sacrifices His son, His only son. And I think that's really the point. It's not so sick and twisted if you think about it, Because sin is so serious a problem that God is going to sacrifice His own son.

Yes, He asks Abraham to trust Him. What's the big deal with this? Hasn't Abraham shown God already that he trusts God? He's done all the things that God has asked up to this point, right? So what's the deal? Except that we do see places in the story where Abraham fudges things, because he doesn't quite trust God, not quite 100 percent. Yeah, he picks up and leaves home and goes to the new land God is showing him. But one of the things that happens is when he's confronted by King Abimelech, he tells Abimelech that Sarah is his sister because he's afraid Abimelech will kill him to take his wife. And of course we have the story of Sarah laughing at the promise God makes to give them a child when she's 75 years old, and Sarah giving her handmaiden to Abraham as a surrogate so Abraham can have a child through her.

Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy<sup>a</sup> will go over there and worship and come again to you."

Well, you're gonna have to make up your mind. Either Abraham is telling his servants a lie because he knows he's not going to be bringing his son back alive. Or he's being vague because he hopes that something will happen in the meantime. Or maybe he's being straight up truthful with them because he trusts God's word.

It might seem incredulous that Abraham would trust like this, but we do have these words from the writer of Hebrews which tells us in chapter 11:

**17** By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, **18** of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." **19** He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.

So there is foreshadowing of death and resurrection. But that's the point. It's not going to be the first time the wood is laid upon the son. It has to be carried by him to his own execution.

And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. **7** And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a

burnt offering?" **8** Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together.

Isaac -- although his name means laughter -- is no fool. "Okay, I see the fire and the wood. Where's the lamb for the offering?" Abraham said God himself will provide the lamb. The implication is Isaac goes along with it, and so they went both of them together. And when they get to the place that God had told them about Abraham built the altar -- notice it is Abraham, not Isaac, who builds the altar. Abraham is doing all the doing and Abraham is a metaphor for God. And once more he lays his son on the wood, like Jesus will be laid on the wood of the cross later.

In Isaac, we don't get a description of him or his reaction, other than the impression that he trusted his father and fully cooperated without resistance. But that doesn't mean that he wasn't afraid. "Courage is doing what you are afraid to do. There can be no courage unless you are scared." Even Jesus was afraid, in his human nature. In the Garden of Gethsemane he prays earnestly, sweat pouring off his brow in great drops like blood. "Let's not do this. Nevertheless, your will be done, not mine." It's OK to be afraid. But faith overcomes it.

Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. **11** But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." **12** He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." **13** And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. **14** So Abraham called the name of that place, "The Lord will provide";<sup>[b]</sup> as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided."

God provides the lamb and will do so again, for us. Notice the future tense there. "It shall be provided." That's powerful. This is another promise that moves forward. God will provide.

The story of Abraham and Isaac could have ended there. But it goes on with one more word from the Lord.

**15** And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven **16** and said, "By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, **17** I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his<sup>[d]</sup> enemies, **18** and

in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.”

God swears by himself, because there's no one higher. Which means it's a promise that will be kept. “Because you have not withheld your son from me, I will multiply your offspring like the stars, like the sand.” Notice when Abraham dies, he has not yet seen all of that. He has the promise.

How about us? Where do we fit in? Jesus tells us as he speaks to the Pharisees, you claim Abraham as your father but I tell you, from these stones I can raise up children. *We* are those living stones. Raised up that way. The rest of the promise is that the nations of the world shall be blessed because you have obeyed my voice. So *we* are part of that blessing. Why? Because of belief. Imagine the faith of one person changing the world. That's what happens here.

Isn't it funny how in science fiction, so often the actions of the past can change the future. Doesn't it make more sense that what we do today affects our life in the future. That's really the story here. It takes just one person changing the world.

Believe. Repent. And believe in the gospel. That is the message of Lent.