

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for June 26, 2011
Lessons: Genesis 22:1-14 and Mark 15:25,33-39

WHOM YOU LOVE

Abraham, our forefather in trusting God and living as God's covenant people, very nearly sacrifices his son. This story stands out from the others in Genesis as terrible. It's not terrifying, as though we were standing on the Manhattan sidewalk watching the twin towers fall or caught in a tornado in Joplin, but calmly terrible, and we need to see it as such.

The likely first question from the modern Christian who is not a biblical literalist is, "Would God really do that – test someone by commanding him to sacrifice his son?" The modern mind jumps quickly to questions of, "What kind of God . . . ?" and is not fully satisfied to read that God finally aborted the test to prevent the father from killing his son. To us, the whole matter seems cruel and heartless. We need to sort out this story with as much care to what we *do not conclude* from it as what we do.

First, we should not trivialize the account in futile attempts to make it harmless. A devotional based on this story uses its attention to detail to say, "This text demonstrates that worship takes planning and effort."¹ Come again? We're not talking about setting up chairs and carrying hymnals from the sanctuary into Bonham Hall. We're not talking about gassing up the car and ironing our clothes on Saturday in preparation for attending the service on Sunday. Worship? We're talking about child-sacrifice.

Mostly, people have neutralized the story by reducing it to no more than a legend about ancient Israel's ban on child sacrifice. It's hard for us to comprehend that long ago, in religious cultures we call pagan, devout people would sacrifice their firstborn sons to their god or goddess, but the Bible provides evidence that Israel emerged from just such a religious context, and so in Exodus we read this:

When the LORD has brought you into the land of the Canaanites, as he swore to you and your ancestors, and has given it to you, you shall set apart to the LORD all that first opens the womb. All the firstborn of your livestock that are males shall be the LORD's. But every firstborn donkey you shall redeem with a sheep; if you do not redeem it, you must break its neck. Every firstborn male among your children you shall redeem.²

So, after Jesus was born, Luke tells us, his parents offered for sacrifice a pair of doves or pigeons as prescribed by the law for poor families that could not afford a lamb. Modern people stand at a loss to comprehend such a requirement. For the modern mentality, the reason to be religious is to gain benefits from it. Why else would anyone bother? We can hardly fathom a culture in which fearing the gods was not considered optional. Ancient Israel didn't even have a word for "religion" as we use it. The issue was life. The land itself belonged to the local gods or, in Israel's case, to the LORD God; the people were merely tenants. The idea of possessing anything autonomously – land, children, or wealth – over against God (as in, "This is mine to do with as I please") was almost unthinkable and would have been regarded as dangerously arrogant and evil.

Even so, this story is exceptional, and we need to see it as abnormal. Merely banning child sacrifice in Israel would not have required such a complex and profoundly disturbing account of the relationship between God and Abraham. The test to which Abraham is put is not God's standard operating procedure, as though God's way of dealing with us were to strain our faith to the breaking point. Jesus' teaches us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation": *Do not bring us to trials, don't put us to the test.* For Christians to tell people that the troubles, sufferings, and griefs of life are tests designed and administered by God is wrong. Terrible things happen in this world, and often they make no sense. I believe they are not supposed to make sense to us because they are wrong, contrary to the will and desire of God, but as the apostle Paul says, God has turned the world over to its own corruption.³ God is not the author of evil, but God can and will enable us to transform bad things that have happened into sufferings that actually do strengthen and deepen our trust in God's love and mercy while teaching us compassion. But that redemptive outcome does not mean God designed the evils as part of a strategy. God is not playing with us. God does not give us people to love just to take them away so we can learn a lesson. The story of Abraham and Isaac does not give us a template for God's standard operating procedure. "I have come," Jesus declares, "that they may have life and have it abundantly."⁴ It is, he says, the thief who comes "to steal and kill and destroy." God is not the thief of life.

For me, the key to unlocking this terrible story is given to us at the outset, when God tells Abraham, "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 . . ." *Whom you love!* It's personal, the love of the father for his son. Isaac is not only the child of promise – the heir given to make Abraham renowned as the "father of many nations,"⁵ but is very personally the son Abraham loves. By sacrificing Isaac, he would not only be giving up the promise and all his benefits from God but would most profoundly be killing his own soul. Gone are all the calculations of religion: *How much will I benefit, and how much is it worth to me?* Gone are all the sterile explanations about refining his faith to purify it or giving him opportunity to prove himself worthy. This isn't about religion; it's about love and life.

Far better to die than to sacrifice one's own child. Remember, Abraham has no fear of hell, because there was no concept of it. So, he's not saving himself for eternity at Isaac's expense. He stands to die a far worse death than his son. Notice the care he takes even as he leads Isaac toward the slaughter. The father carries the knife and the fire, the dangerous things that might hurt the boy.⁶ Abraham loves his son.

Here's the open-ended question. How can we leave behind the pagan fear of God without detaching ourselves from our central and primary relationship with God? Can God possibly be all-important to us without being fearsome, demanding, and tyrannical? Can we take seriously a God who loves us and longs to forgive? Without the pressures of guilt, fear, and shame, is Christianity doomed to degenerate into a religion of convenience, a faith for which the idea of sacrificing anything seems unwarranted? Are the frightened the only people who really care about God? Is God left with no choice but to be forever feared or else taken for granted or abandoned altogether?

I realize there are other, simpler ways to read this story of father and son – less troubling ways – but I believe our reading from the Gospel of Mark invalidates them for us. What Abraham did not have to do, God did. *Take your Son, your only Son, Jesus, whom you love, and offer him there.*

Imagine Isaac, the boy, when he finally sees what his father is doing and realizes who the sacrifice is to be. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Isaac is spared, but Jesus willingly joins himself in suffering, humiliation, and death with all who suffer in this world in the apparent absence of God's compassion and justice. He steps outside the circle of God's faithfulness to stand with all the Godforsaken people in this world, all those whose trust seems betrayed, whose lives are cut off, and whose deaths make no good sense.⁷

Life is not a test, but it is a struggle, and as long as God continues to respect our freedom, the struggle continues. As long as God keeps trying to win us over with love and mercy rather than winning over us by force, the questions remain. Will we ever care about God, God's love for us, and God's love for the whole world and its people, without the pagan's fear of God's wrath or the religionist's shallow commitment to believing as long as faith pays off with benefits?

Let this terrible story of father and son be the extreme, not the norm. God does not try to break our faith or dash our hopes; life does enough of both. But let the questions remain open-ended. Will God matter to us if we're neither terrified of God's wrath nor greedy for God's blessings? Can we love God in a grownup way? Anybody can believe when it pays off and makes nice sense of life. Can we follow Jesus in trusting God and standing by each other when life turns cruel and answers fail? Amen.

Notes:

1. *These Days*, Tuesday, June 21, 2011.
2. Exodus 13:11-13.
3. Romans 8:19-21.
4. John 10:10
5. Genesis 17:5. Also Romans 4:17-18.
6. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, Westminster Press, p. 235
7. See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*.