

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Sunday, July 2, 2023
10am

Text: Genesis 22:1-14

Theme: Anything but Ordinary: The Binding of Isaac
[pastoral warning: violence, child sacrifice]

[prayer]

What a story, right?

Biblical scholar Terence E. Fretheim writes, “This is a classic text. It has captivated the imaginations of numerous interpreters...It has played a special role in both Jewish and Christian traditions. Before its depth and breadth one stands on holy ground.”¹

But I wonder: Did the ground on that mountain feel holy to Abraham?

[pause]

Last week we heard how at God’s command Abraham rose early in the morning and gave provisions to Hagar and Ishmael and then sent them away. God has already asked Abraham to sacrifice one of his sons to the wilderness. But now, without a hint of irony, God commands him to sacrifice his remaining son, too. Again, Abraham rises early in the morning. He saddles a donkey with provisions, and he puts the wood for the burnt offering on his son’s back. But this time Abraham carries the tools of his family’s destruction: fire and a knife.

One of the difficult, even disturbing, aspects of this story is its lack of emotion. The narrator does not hint at Abraham’s psychological state. This lack of emotional cues is meant to highlight Abraham’s deep trust in God. When Isaac innocently asks, “Father, I see we have fire and wood, but where is the lamb for

¹ “Genesis 22:1-19 Reflections” by Terrence E. Fretheim. In *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Volume I – General & Old Testament Articles, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus*. Edited by Leander E. Keck, et al. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press (1994). Pages 498-499.

the burnt offering?” Abraham simply responds, “God will provide, my son” (vv. 7-8). And so, we are left to imagine how Abraham felt as he reassured Isaac. Peaceful? Confident that God would provide a substitute sacrifice? Or terrified and guilty even as he keeps faith for his son’s sake?

A common criticism of this story is that Abraham’s trust in God is blind, and blind trust is not virtuous when another person’s life is at stake. Isaac appears to be a mere pawn in Abraham and God’s trust exercise and that makes us deeply uncomfortable. Some rabbis even argue that Abraham did not actually pass God’s test. Instead, they say, he failed it. He failed it because, even though he pleaded for God to spare the lives of complete strangers in Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18), he did not plead with God to spare the life of Isaac, his only son. Instead, Abraham was silent before this seemingly monstrous demand.

I have a hard time believing that the lack of emotional detail in this story means that Abraham is whistling in the dark, blithely and peacefully splitting the wood and sharpening the knife. You can trust God and still experience incredible pain in the trusting. Our artist for this Sunday, Hannah Garrity, writes,

“My five-year-old daughter always wants to know about my drawings. ‘That was mean of God,’ she said, as I explained how sad Abraham was that he had to kill his son. Being a mother, this moment is purely unfathomable. It is so painful – I cannot bear to imagine the moment. Isaac trusted his father...Abraham’s own heart must have been breaking in this moment. Here, I imagine how Abraham felt by overlaying a shattered pattern over a portrait of his face.”²

That was mean of God. Out of the mouths of babes, am I right?

Friends, it’s okay if this story makes you angry. It’s okay if this story makes you question God’s love and justice. It’s okay if this story makes you wonder if you even know God at all. This story is holy precisely because it is so hard to understand. It refuses to be reduced to trite interpretations. It refuses to trivialize our relationship with God. When we read this story, we wrestle with Abraham’s choice and with our own. When we read this story, we hold ourselves in fear and

² Artist’s statement for “To Kill His Son” by Hannah Garrity. Ink on paper. Inspired by Genesis 22:1-14. A Sanctified Art, LLC. sanctifiedart.org.

trembling before a God who could command of us the same obedience He commanded of Abraham.

[pause]

The binding of Isaac is the culmination of Abraham's narrative arc, an arc that begins with his special calling by God and the promise God makes to him: That though Abraham is old, and his wife Sarah is barren, she will give him a son, and through that son a mighty nation will be born. Isaac is the fruit of the fidelity to God that distinguishes Abraham as the father of faith.

And throughout this narrative arc, we are reminded over and over again that mutual trust is the bedrock of relationships. Abraham's relationship with God is grounded in his trust that God keeps God's promises, no matter how impossible they may seem. It was impossible that Sarah should get pregnant...and yet, God said it would be so, and so it was. And God also promised that He would make a mighty nation out of Isaac, and Abraham's descendants would one day inherit the land beneath Abraham's feet. But God's command to sacrifice Isaac appears to put God's promise in jeopardy. So, the question before Abraham is not whether he will sacrifice his son Isaac. That is a secondary issue. The question before Abraham is does he believe God will keep his promises, even when all evidence points to the contrary?

As Walter Bruggemann writes, "Faith says 'yes' to the promise...It also says 'yes' to the command which makes the promise only a promise." Abraham must look beyond the tunnel vision of his momentary anguish and grasp the true vision that God offers. Whatever happens on that mountain, does Abraham trust that God will continue to provide for his future?

[pause]

It is true that God's test of Abraham is extreme; I won't try to explain why God had to test Abraham's faithfulness in such a brutal manner. But despite our discomfort with the brutality of this story, there is no escaping the virtue of Abraham's actions. Abraham acts in accordance with his trust in a God who has provided and will continue to provide for his future. "God will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And then Abraham looked up and saw a ram.

Abraham's trust in God's future provision was vindicated; God provided a way forward.

As followers of Jesus Christ, our trust in God is also vindicated. God has provided a future for us through the death and resurrection of *His* only son. Jesus is the true vision God offers beyond the tunnel vision of our basest instincts. We place our trust in Jesus, who, like Abraham, was obedient to the will of God – obedient to the point of death on a cross.

But here is the difference, and the good news, in these two stories of sacrifice: Jesus's obedience to God did not come at the expense of other people. The divine love and trust Jesus demonstrated was not sacrificial; it was *self*-sacrificial. At the Last Supper, the altar of sacrifice was transformed into the communion table, where Jesus broke the bread and passed the wine to his disciples as symbols of his broken body and blood, soon to be sacrificed for their sakes and the world's. In the story of Abraham and Isaac, we see a foreshadowing of Jesus's destiny: God's only son, carrying his cross to the place of execution. "God will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." Only this offering would be the final of its kind, and out of it would emerge a new religious ethic, grounded in the redemptive life and death of Jesus Christ.

We are learning in our *Not in God's Name* book study that at the root of human violence is the inability to trust each other. But I also wonder if our propensity to do evil – to hurt and harm and marginalize and oppress – is because we also do not trust God. We do not trust that God will – indeed, that God already has provided perfectly for our future. And so, we seek to control that future and we hurt other people in the process, often sacrificing them on the altars of our religious and ideological beliefs and then calling that obedience to and love of God.

Jesus shows us a different way. Jesus demonstrated perfect trust in God – a trust so grounded in God's promised future reign that he was free of fear for that future. And being set free from fear, Jesus was free instead to live a life of compassion instead of control. This was in stark contrast to the religious institution of his time, which sought to secure God's future reign through a legalism that oppressed the poor and marginalized the outcast.

We may admire Abraham's obedience, or scorn it, or feel impossibly burdened by it. But none of that ultimately matters because as Christians we are called to emulate Christ. And Christ says this: "Love each other as I have loved you. No one has greater love than to give up one's life for one's friends" (John 15:12-13 CEB).

Christ asks that you and I be prepared to offer up our lives for the sake of God's kingdom. But keep in mind that it is only our lives we can offer, and no one else's. My hope is that when our faith and trust in God is tested our response will flow from an unshakeable confidence in the future that God has already secured for us in Jesus Christ. May we trust God's future enough that we are set free to love and serve our neighbors as selflessly as Jesus commands us to.

Amen.