

Your Only Son
Genesis 22: 1-18

**First Presbyterian Church
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Gerrit Scott Dawson**

Late Christmas Eve, the house is quiet. The air outside is crisp and cool enough that it feels like Christmas. A well-tended, mellow fire glows in the fireplace. A warm drink is in your hand. A beloved dear one is next to you. You have decided to exchange gifts now, as midnight approaches and the silence deepens.

You open a beautifully wrapped package. It was given to you with love. You see the back of the gift first, but you know what it is. “Oh!” you say, “A print!”

“Yes,” comes the reply. “I have a frame picked out if you decide to keep it.”

“It’s a Rembrandt etching,” you say, reading the label on the back. There is a smile on your face. It feels good to be this known and this loved. Then you turn the print over to look at the etching. The smile leaves your face.

On Christmas Eve night in the deep peace of that once-a-year moment, your dearly beloved has given you a depiction of an old man with sunken, black eyes. In one hand he grips a knife. His other hand is holding firmly the head of a boy around the eyes. The lad is on his knees, chest bent over the old man’s knee, face pressed against the man’s belly. An altar with a tray upon it is under the boy’s neckline. The knife hand of the old man appears to have been in motion, heading towards the boy.

What kind of present is this? You look closer at the old man’s face. Deep lines of care are in his cheeks. The mouth is black and hollow like the eyes. On his face you see that the adrenalin is still surging through him. The hot blood of his intention is still there. But now sadness, exhaustion and relief have flooded his face as well.

Just inches from the old man’s face is the face of an angel, speaking to him. The angel’s arms are wrapped around him. The angel is so close he could smell the emotion on the man. One of the angel’s hands is gripping the knife arm. The swing will not follow through. A great tragedy has been averted. The other

angelic hand is upon the arm of the old man which holds the boy's face. The angel could enfold them both in his wings. His face holds reassurance. He is strongly calming. "Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything to him."

You are revolted. Disturbed. "Why did you give me this?!"

"This," says your dear one, "Is Christmas. This is what Christmas means. Once I saw it, I had to give it to you because I love you."

Is that the Christmas story we wanted to hear this morning, coming in our festive clothes to the warm, richly decorated sanctuary? Just a few days before we light the candles and sing Joy to the World, do we want to hear how the LORD I Am told an old man to take his son and a knife to the top of a mountain?

For weeks now we have been talking about the promises God made to Abraham and Sarah. The LORD had called out one man with the purpose of blessing the entire world through him. "Go to the place I will provide," the LORD had said. And Abraham had gone.

There were promises of land and wealth, and they were fulfilled. There was the promise of a descendant. Decades passed before it came to be. But finally Isaac, the boy whose name means Laughter, was born as the joyful sign of promises kept. So the mission of God seemed destined to be completed. Through the offspring of Abraham the whole world would be blessed.

Genesis gives us just seven verses to enjoy Isaac's birth. Then there is an interlude concerning other matters. These other stories tells us that time is passing. Isaac is growing. But we do not see it. We return to Isaac abruptly with the words, "After these things, God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" Something dire is about to occur.

Abraham replied with the perfect human response of faith to God's call. As Moses, Samuel and Isaiah would someday echo, Abraham answered, "Here am I!" When God calls, the faithful heart replies immediately, simply, "Yes, Here am I. At your service. At your word, I will act. Here am I."

Perhaps Abraham wished he had not answered the call. Because God 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."

As if it wasn't horrifyingly clear, the storyteller pounds it home. Take your son. Your only son. The boy named laughter. The one you love. The one I promised you. The one you waited for. *Sacrifice him.*

Several chapters earlier, Abraham had been bold enough to negotiate with God for the city of Sodom. He had been daring in his replies and bargaining. But in this moment, Abraham says nothing. He just gets up the next morning, gets ready and leaves. Three days they journeyed together. What thoughts did Abraham keep inside as they bantered with the servants or idly passed the trip with conversation? Didn't Isaac look all the more precious in those moments, as Abraham noticed every detail, seeing him like he had never seen him before, his boy, his precious boy? Did Abraham curse God? Or did he believe God would change his requirement and provide a way out? The Scripture deliberately leaves us to ponder all these questions, to pour our own emotions into these terrible three days.

When the mountain came into view, Abraham dismissed the servants and went on alone with Isaac. He told them, "The boy and I will go over there and worship and come back again." We will come back again. Did Abraham believe that somehow God would keep his promise and spare the son of promise? Or was he just stalling?

Isaac carried the wood for the fire on his own back. Eventually he noticed that something was missing. He asked a question. Father, the fire and the wood are here but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

Abraham did not try to explain. He put the responsibility back on God where it belonged. "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." There was hope in his words. Maybe even a bit of defiance. And cruel irony. God will provide. It was just what the LORD had said to Abraham in the beginning, "Go to the land I will provide, that I will show you." OK, you're the great provider. You answer the boy! This is on your head. I act at your word, not mine. I will remain as you have asked me to be, faithful, waiting for you.

They reached the top of the mountain. God said nothing. The dreadful command hung upon Abraham without relief. Abraham built the altar. Still no new word came. Did God really mean for him to do this horrible thing? Abraham bound Isaac. The lad did not resist. What went through Abraham's desperate mind? God, can't you see I'm going to obey you? Where are you? Can't we stop now? No word came. Abraham put the boy named Laughter on the altar. The heavens stayed silent. Look, God, I've got the knife. I'll do it. Just like you said.

The promise will die. Is that what you want? No reply. Adrenalin surged through Abraham. He trembled. His life was being sucked hollow even as his eyes sunk and his face collapsed. He drew back the knife and his brain sent the signal to his hand to come down.

And then like the sound of distant horns from across the hills came the voice of the angel. It gathered power as it arrived at last, the very last instant, all the way from the ends of the earth. “Abraham! Abraham!”

“Here am I!” he said, as he had always said, “Oh, here am I!” Relief coursed through him.

“Stay your hand. Do not lay your hand on the boy. Now I know that you fear God, seeing that you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.”

Then Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught in the thicket. There was the offering. Abraham named that place, “The LORD will provide.” For at the utmost extremity of need in the final possible millisecond, God had indeed provided the sacrifice.

How did God’s people ever make sense of this story in the centuries before Jesus? But with his arrival everything comes into focus. Abraham, take your Son, your only Son, Isaac whom you love. Can we not hear the resonance with the New Testament? At Jesus’ baptism, his Father declared, “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” And in John’s gospel we read the precious words, “For God so loved the world that *he gave his only begotten Son* that whoever believes in him might not perish but have everlasting life.” And in John’s letter we read, “In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”

Abraham declared in desperate faith, “God will provide the lamb.” When John the Baptist saw Jesus approaching the Jordan River, he declared, “Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” God did provide the sacrifice. His own Son for the world. He carried his own cross, just as Isaac carried the wood on his back, and he ascended the hill of Calvary. And, just in case it wasn’t clear, Mount Moriah where Abraham went is Jerusalem, the place where the Son of God sacrificed his life for us.

This story can only be tolerated in light of the fact that God himself did for us what he asked of Abraham but did not ultimately require. He gave his own,

beloved Son as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. God did not hold himself aloof from us. He entered our lost and forsaken condition. He entered into the depths of our darkness. He took upon himself the agony of a world broken by its fall into sin. He said, "I will take your burden. I will take up the price of all the sacrifices because of sin that you have had to make." For the reality of sin has meant dire consequences for each of us. We live now in a world where people die, and many die too soon, too soon. We live in a world where relationships meant to last break apart. We live in a world where trust is betrayed, truth is distorted, and love is rejected. Every day we live, our vision of how life in the world should be, the dream written into our bones, is sacrificed to the pain of how life actually is. But the news of the Gospel is God said, "I'll take that. I will provide the sacrifice that leads to reconciliation. I will give my own Son in order that the world might be set right. I will pay the price so that you can live. I will sacrifice to remove your sin and bring you close again."

The story of Abraham and Isaac is the inner meaning of why the Virgin gave birth to a Son and laid him in a manger. God came to us, in poverty and risk, in weakness and complete availability. His is the sacrifice that alone makes sense, and ultimately heals, all that has been lost in life and the world because of sin.

Some years ago, this story became the very messenger of hope for a parent who had lost a young child. As a talented young Episcopalian pastor, John Claypool was a rising star in the church. He had rich preaching gifts and a great church. But in the middle of his ministry, Claypool's young daughter was struck with leukemia and, after a brave fight, she died at age ten.

Thousands had prayed for healing, but to no avail. Claypool recounts the despair into which he plunged after her death. One night when he couldn't sleep, he went downstairs to his den and absently pulled from his shelves a commentary on Genesis. He happened to open it to this story. The commentator noted how Abraham was required to acknowledge that Isaac was a gift. Not his by right. Not his to keep. By offering his son, Abraham acknowledged that Isaac came to him by promise, by grace beyond hope in his old age from God's hand. So the Giver retained the right to the gift. Abraham had not earned Isaac nor was he entitled to him. In his terrifying act of faithfulness, Abraham did what Adam and Eve had failed to do: he acknowledged that all life always belongs to the Creator.

In that moment, Claypool said, he realized he had a choice. He could rail forever in his anger that his precious daughter had been taken from him so young. He could claim every right to such feelings. Or he could choose to recognize that

each person, each life is a gift. So he could choose the way of gratitude for the time he had in this world with such a beautiful gift. There in the den, Claypool realized that even one day with his daughter had been a gift beyond his deserving. “Life is a gift and even birth is a windfall.”ⁱ From that hour, Claypool says his healing began.

The horror and the shock in this story points us to the passion of God’s own sacrifice. He did what he asked Abraham to do. He knew the price of that terrible offering out of love for us. The little baby crying in the hay at Christmas is God’s own laughter, God’s own Son of Promise, offered to the world with the words, “Here am I!” Yes, here am I, the God who gives his Son for you.

The wood pops in the fireplace. You take the print from your beloved’s hand. It’s still awful. But you see now the gift within the horror. It is a picture of the offering of the very heart of oneself. The picture of Abraham with Isaac is a window on the stable at Bethlehem. You accept it now with gratitude. You realize now, this is exactly what Christmas is all about.

ⁱ John Claypool, “The Help in Time of Trouble,” 1995.

