

A Terrible Sacrifice

Genesis 22:1-14

Stories of Genesis: When God Shows Up

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Worship at 8:30, 10, and 11:30 a.m.

I once read that in an Army officer's evaluation, a young lieutenant was criticized in the following way: "This officer tends to become confused when given conflicting instructions." Who wouldn't? I remember a weather broadcast in Louisville that said in one breath, "There is danger of lightning so seek the lowest ground possible and there is a flood watch so go to high ground." So which is it? Certainly that kind of conflict could have been on Abraham's mind. Isaac is the fulfillment of the promise and God asks him to offer up that very promise. As we look at this story of Father Abraham, what is God's word to us on this Father's Day? Let us pray.

Holy God, Giver of all wisdom, we ask that by the power of the your Holy Spirit, we would be able to discern your word to us, to truly hear it and then obey it, for the sake of Christ our Savior, in whose name we pray.

We are in a series of sermons that will take us through much of the history of the patriarchs – our fathers in the faith (our mothers as well, but today we are looking at Father Abraham). As we look at the stories of Genesis, we are asking the question: What happens when God shows up?

There are times, aren't there, when we beg God to show up, to give us a sign of his presence and to comfort us. Thankfully, those times happen. God shows up and we feel his embrace. But there are times when God shows up and our lives get turned upside down. We don't have a clue what God is doing and it is often not until we get to the other side of the experience that we are able to see that God had a good purpose in mind.

This is one of those difficult times. God shows up, yet again, to Abraham. God has been doing this to Abraham since we began this series in Genesis 12. At the beginning, God came to Abraham and asked him to leave his home – leave everything familiar and set out into unknown territory. He blessed Abraham with his presence and gave him a promise that he would make of him a great nation. This was a promise of a future that included many descendants.

Last week, God showed up and told Abraham that the promised heir was on the way. Of course, he tells Abraham this when he is old and Sarah is past child-bearing age. Sarah laughs out of skepticism and Abraham laughs for joy. It's good to know that the promise is on its way. In fact, this is really good news, because Abraham and Sarah have been trying to make the promise come true and they've done some really dangerous things that made their lives worse, not better.

And now, at the last, God shows up again and ask Abraham to give up the one visible sign that he was really going to get what was promised to him. For Abraham, God showing up seems to involve less comfort and more risk: The first time, God calls, Abraham follows and he is cut off from his past. Now, God calls and if Abraham follows, it seems he will be cut off from his future.

This is a worst case scenario for any of us...the most frightening thing a parent could contemplate is the loss of a child. This is what Abraham faces and more. He is facing the loss of all he has ever hoped for as he left everything to follow God. He's near the end of his life and God asks this of him? This is one of the most compelling stories in scripture. What is God thinking?!

This story has consumed its readers for thousands of years and the questions persist. Bruce Feiler, author of *Abraham and Walking the Scripture*, says that this text has encouraged religious partisans over the centuries to ask, "Would you kill for God? And then to answer too frequently, "Yes." Some scholars today are saying that it gives a warrant to child abusers and then others really want to get inside the mind of Isaac, who, except for one question, is incredibly silent and obedient in this story.

Those are serious questions, but they read the text through our issues. We need to keep in mind what God's issues are. We do have the privilege of knowing the outcome of the story. As well, we know how the New Testament writers understood this story. So, for this day, we will take it as God's Word to us. We've already said, "Thanks be to God" and we've asked the Holy Spirit to help us understand what we need to learn about God and ourselves. So, let's dig into this story.

As soon as God calls Abraham's name, he answers "Here I am...hey, God, I'm here!" He knows it is God calling and he responds. Then, God, without any warning, gives him this test. (We know it's a test. Abraham doesn't.) It is clear that Isaac is the one son, the one beloved son, the child of promise. God knows what he asking of this father. God then tells him to take Isaac to a place that he will show him. He gives him general direction toward Moriah, but the actual destination is yet to be revealed. This is like the first call to the unknown... "Go to a place I will show you." At this point, I would be asking God if, for once, he just couldn't give me the Mapquest directions.

The story then begins a slow, deliberate and almost silent descent into deep, deep sadness. Abraham obeys, but each motion comes slowly. Our English translations add conjunctions and it gives the sense of getting on with the task. But in the Hebrew, it's as if Abraham is doing what he's been told, but that he's trying to delay the inevitable. Or, he's moving slowly so that he can see how God is going to keep the promise. This actually reminds us of how we count for our children when we want them to do some task they don't like. By the time we get to seven and see they're not budging, we start counting seven and a half, seven and three-quarters...

So, Abraham gets up. He saddles the donkey. He takes two servants and Isaac. He chops wood. He sets out. They journey for three silent days. He sees Moriah, tells the servants to stay behind, puts wood on Isaac's shoulders...the time is getting really close and

now Isaac himself asks, "Where's the sacrifice?" Abraham tells him that God will provide. The story then continues in its silent and deliberate way: Abraham builds the altar. He puts wood on it. He binds Isaac. He puts Isaac on the altar. He gets the knife. He lifts the knife. Then, just in the nick o' time, Abraham hears his name again and answers, again "Here I am." Isaac's life is saved and God provides a substitute sacrifice for their worship and not a moment too soon!

This story just wrings it out of us, doesn't it? In all of this, Abraham is unwavering in his obedience to what he has heard God tell him to do, even when it seems that all will be lost if he does this thing. But in fact, all is gained and we breathe a sigh of relief.

This trudging towards Moriah and this final act are not the only expressions we see of Abraham's faith, however. When he sees Moriah, he turns to the servants and tells them to stay in place with the assurance that both he and Isaac will return. He believes that Isaac is the promise God said he was and he knows that if he leaves with Isaac, he will come back with Isaac. He doesn't know how, but if God could give him this son in an impossible time, then God can preserve his son in the face of an impossible command.

There is a second moment of public faithfulness. Isaac calls to him and Abraham answers, "Here I am." Notice that this is the same thing that Abraham says when God calls him. Abraham, the father, is able to be present with...really with his son because he is present with...really with God. Fathers, on this day, I would encourage you to take heart from this – that you can be the kind of father your children need when you are present to God as God's child and build your life on that relationship. Now, when Isaac asks about the sacrifice, Abraham doesn't tell him what Isaac must surely fear, he tells him what faith tells him – that God will provide. He doesn't know how, but it has to be true.

As Christians, we can't help but think about the story of God the Father sending Christ the son for us as we read this passage. If we think of Abraham as a metaphor for God and realize the deep sorrow that accompanied him on this journey, we get a glimpse into what must have been going on in God's own heart as His son was moving inevitably toward the cross.

This is an intense story. Abraham and Isaac, stand as witnesses as to what is possible when God shows up and asks us to be faithful, to obey him when it seems that we will lose everything if we do. It is such a witness, that to this day, the place is pointed out as the place where God provided. In the tradition of centuries, Jerusalem is considered to be the location of Moriah and thus the place where God provided the solution for our sin when Jesus went to the cross.

So, why is the place pointed out to this day? What does this tell us that we need to know as we walk out that door and into God's world?

First, this was really a test, but remember, there are two kinds of tests in this world: There are the tests that we endure all our lives...the test we dread. They are the tests that determine who's in, who's out...who's good enough and who just won't make the cut. Sometimes we take those tests. Sometimes we give those tests

I think that this test was a second kind of test – the kind that is given to build confidence. It's what the Marines do at basic training when they run recruits through "The Crucible" at the end of boot camp. They do this to put all the training together and to let the young men and women know that yes, they can do what is asked of them. The instructors send them out because they know that they can do it. At the end, the recruits are filled with great, but exhausted joy. They are now called "Marine" for the first time and they know it to be true. They know who they are.

I think that this is the kind of test that Abraham has just endured: God tells him that he (God) now knows that he is faithful. God actually knew all along, but, as John Calvin says, sometimes God has to speak in our language to get a point across. So, God lets Abraham know that God is assured of Abraham's faithfulness and obedience. And we also get the sense as we read those last words in the story that God is jumping for joy!

And it is in this last celebration of God over Abraham, where God repeats the promise more strongly than ever, that we understand what it means when God shows up for us in Jesus Christ.

As you heard the words of scripture being read, you surely heard echoes of Paul, another person who was knocked to the ground when God showed up in his life. God says to Abraham, "...you have not withheld your son, your only son" and we should hear like a bell, the Apostles Paul saying in Romans 8, "What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not also give us everything else?"

God does, indeed give us everything else, including life itself. And part of that life is sharing in God's work in this world. God put the promise (which had all but disappeared) back into Abraham's hands and that promise was to benefit the whole world – the nations were to be blessed through Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

Well, God has placed that blessing in our hands as well, as Jesus asks us to go out into the whole world with good news. Good news, that God will provide a way out for all of that message, in word and deed, it to benefit all the nations of the earth and us. Just as he put Isaac back into the hands of Abraham, so God has placed the promise in your hands.

And now you are being asked to go into places that are unknown to you to share that promise of hope and abundant life. Some of those places may seem to be a worst-case scenario for you, but Paul goes on to assure us that even in worst case scenarios, "...we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For we are convinced that neither life nor death, nor angels or rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

The promise, God's purposes are in your hands and you can go into your future, fulfilling those purposes, knowing that nothing, not anything you've done in your past, not anything that bothers you right now, not any worry about your future, not your job or your

family or the polls...not even what God calls you to do, can separate you from the love of God, who is with you, even when it seems sorrowful and silent, and who cheers you when you get to the other side. Amen.