

Ben Lattimer
Stone Church of the Brethren
Sermon
July 23, 2023
Genesis 22
Don't Do It!

Scripture & Sermon

Our scripture this morning comes from Genesis, chapter 22. It's a story of Abraham and his son, Isaac. And I'll be honest - it's an awful story. It may well be the scariest story in the Bible - especially for kids. So, I want to start out by promising that no one dies in this story - well, except for the ram that gets sacrificed at the end. As Carolyn Brown is quick to point out - "Isaac was never in danger. God had other plans - there was [that] ram hidden in the bushes [after all...]. In fact, in those days other religions insisted that parents sacrifice their first child to their god. Our God, however, does not, never did, never will." Let me be clear...

The story begins like this:
After these things... God *tested* Abraham.

[These italicized sections down. My thoughts, my angst... No eye contact here.] God does not know – and he must know!... So much is at stake, so much is riding on Abraham.

He called to him, "Abraham!" And Abraham said, "Here I am."

God said to him: "Take your son... your only son whom you love... Take Isaac... Go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I will show you..."

What thoughts go through the mind of a father?...

A Test...

It's a test, we are told. God - as we shall see - from the start has no intention of having the act carried out. The practice was known to other ancient cultures among Israel's neighbors. But it is a practice that is repeatedly denounced throughout the Old Testament - from Leviticus to Ezekiel. How could you do such a thing?! - the prophet Jeremiah asks - "a thing which [God] never commanded or spoke of, nor did it ever enter [God's] mind..." And yet - here we are...

In the ancient world, a child was considered less an individual and more an extension of the parent - the father's legacy, immortality. And yet...

Maybe this is supposed to be a story explaining the evolution - from human sacrifice to animal sacrifice... But still...

It's "just" a test... But Abraham doesn't know that. And neither does Isaac...

What God is this that asks for such a thing?...

[slowly, grudgingly, stalling whenever possible – evoke Abraham’s feelings in the telling.]
Abraham rose early the next morning. He saddled his donkey. He cut wood for the burnt offering and set it out. He took two of his young men with him... and his son... Isaac...

Back to the Story

So Abraham set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and he saw the place in the distance... Abraham said to his young men, *[I’ve got to sell these lines – the brokenness of Abraham]* “Stay here with the donkey. *[pointing]* The boy and I will go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.”

[always methodically, slowly, grudgingly - trying to delay the inevitable] Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering. He laid it on his son Isaac. Abraham himself carried the fire... and the knife...

I cry out to him across the centuries: Turn back! Don’t do it! Do not do this thing! Throw away the knife! Obey not such orders – though they come from Almighty God himself! If this is what it means to fear God... Turn back!

And still they walked on... the two of them together...

I’m Supposed to Tell you...

I know I’m supposed to tell you that Isaac is an image of Jesus - the wood for the offering laid across his back, like the wood of the cross borne by Christ.

Modern Jews who read this story focus on Isaac. They identify with the suffering that marks the experience of the children of the promise...

Or I’m supposed to tell you about Abraham’s faithfulness - willing to sacrifice *anything* in obedience to God. Faith counted as righteousness.

But maybe I’ve seen too much - too many stories of atrocities committed in the name of obedience to God, horrors enacted “under the banner of heaven...”¹

Back to the Story

Isaac said to his father Abraham, “Father!”

¹ *Under the Banner of Heaven*, is the title of John Krakauer’s book - and the movie based on it - about the Lafferty brothers in Utah who murdered their sister-in-law and niece, believing that God had instructed them to do so.

[gently, with tenderness – the whole sermon rides on the delivery of these lines by Abraham] “Here I am, my son.”

“The fire and the wood are here... but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?”

Abraham’s God is supposed to be different... He has been good. He has seen Abraham through for so many years. They have walked together – the long journey from Ur... delivering Lot from Sodom... in dealings with Pharaohs and Kings ... a child in old age... promises... God has been faithful. They speak face to face, as friends... [almost pleading] as friends... Perhaps now... What is faith?... Trust, what is trust?...

Abraham said to him, “God will see to the lamb for a burnt offering... my son.”
And still they walked on... the two of them together.

The inexorable drumbeat...

What thoughts, O Abraham? What thoughts? Trust... You have spoken face to face, as with a friend. Trust... He has been faithful. Trust... Where is he now?...

[Slowly again, but building now as the story climaxes.] They came to the place that God had shown him. Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac... He laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.

[ending up] Then Abraham reached out his hand and raised the knife to kill his son... *[so much tension... let it set there for a while.]*

[Then - with urgency...] “Abraham!” The angel of the LORD called to him from heaven. “Abraham!”

“Here I am!” Abraham replied.

[Here God is relieved] “Do not lay a hand on the boy or do anything to him! Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.”

[The tension relieved, but not gone... denouement] Abraham raised his eyes and he saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering *instead of* his son.

Failing the Test

[Looking into the camera...]

Seriously, honey - who chose this scripture?! Who thought this would be a good idea?

I am mad at Abraham! Just like that?! He goes along with it? Abraham who bartered with God just 4 chapters ago for the lives of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, here says nothing?! Not a word on behalf of his son? No offer to trade places? To me, Abraham failed the test.

Maybe it’s me. Maybe my faith isn’t as strong as Abraham’s... But to be honest - if that’s what faith means - if that’s what faith looks like... I don’t want it. If that’s our vision of what it means to be faithful - then maybe it’s time for a new understanding of faithfulness...

When I was younger, maybe this vision of radical faith willing to sacrifice everything,

maybe... But now?

Rembrandt

I want to show you something:

Rembrandt - the artist - painted this story back in 1636...



Nearly 20 years later - in 1655 - after experiencing the deaths of three of his four children - he drew the scene again...



See how it shifts. You can see them side by side.

In the first image, so zealous is faithful Abraham in his fervor to remain obedient to the command of the Lord, that the angel must nearly restrain him. But here in the second

image, the father holds his son almost tenderly - the knife away.

I've seen too much suffering in the world to think that more sacrifice like this is possibly the way to healing...

Aesop's Fables...

I wonder if some of the trouble is that we tend to read these Bible stories like Aesop's fables - always looking for a pithy moral for us to remember. Or we read them like uncomplicated little tales of heroes and villains. These are the heroes, right? So they must be doing the right thing... right?

But the truth is these stories - these characters - even God are so much deeper, more complex. It's not just a matter of using the heroes as models and doing what they do... They get it right and they get it wrong. The relationships with God and with each other keep growing... We keep learning.

Cycles of Trauma

I am mad at Abraham - and I am mad at God. God just *had* to know - had to know how *committed* Abraham was - even after all they had been through together. Abraham was so important... But at what cost?!

I can't pretend this story has a happy ending. Because I remember. *Isaac* remembers. This moment here. Abraham and Sarah had this rich relationship with God. But after this - Sarah dies in the very next chapter, Abraham not long after. And *Isaac*... He has very few interactions with God in the chapters to come. His relationship with God throughout the rest of Genesis is strained - distant - and no wonder.

Maybe God failed the test too? So invested in this family that he had to know, and yet in so doing he created cycles of spiritual trauma and family dysfunction that last for generations.

I wonder how often we do the same thing. How many children are "sacrificed" in the name of faithfulness to God? How many gay or trans kids "sacrificed" to "the authority of scripture"? Cycles of trauma that create strained and distant relationships for generations...

How many children have we sacrificed on the altar of ministry - [*ending up?*] or in faithfulness... to our work? It's often good work - and our acts of service genuinely matter to the community - and to the kingdom of God. But I wonder if this story invites us to reframe our vision...

It's not moving away from service. But what if - what if we focused on ways of serving and doing ministry together? Paths of faithfulness that are lifegiving - building up our families

and the faith of our children - modeling and teaching true faithfulness and love...

Knowing the story lets us learn from it - lets us break the cycles. Walking instead in paths of righteousness and faithfulness that bring life...

Amen.