

A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on November 7, 2021

THE COMMAND TO SACRIFICE ISAAC

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ² He 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 that I shall show you." Genesis 22:1-2

Today we continue our series on core stories from the Bible. Last week Judith introduced the story of Abraham. God called Abraham to be the father of the chosen people. Judith got to share with you the easy positive story of Abraham.

The passage for today is one of the most difficult narratives to find positive meaning. In fact, I do not believe that I have ever attempted to preach on the 22nd chapter of the book of Genesis. This is a very hard story to understand and find a positive meaning.

The story begins with God telling Abraham to take his son, Isaac, to a sacred mountain and sacrifice him. Abraham and Sarah had waited years for this son. Isaac was the key to the promise of creating the chosen people. But Abraham was obedient to God and took his son on a long journey. Abraham had Isaac carry the wood on which the sacrifice would be burned. They finally find their way to the designated holy spot. Abraham binds his son and places him on the altar. He takes out a knife and is about to kill his son, when an angel stays his hand. Abraham is told not to sacrifice his son. The angel points out a ram caught in some trees and tells Abraham to sacrifice the ram in place of his son.

What a horrible story. The first verse calls this the testing of Abraham. If we merely read this narrative in a straightforward way it makes God out to be cruel. This testing would seem to be a form of torture for Abraham, Sarah and Isaac. It would seem to me that they all would have needed to be treated for post-traumatic stress syndrome. This is why I have avoided preaching on this passage for forty years.

I suggest that we try some different approaches to gain meaning to this story from Genesis.

First, let us seek to understand this story from the perspective of scholars such as anthropologists, archeologists and historians of religion. Many years ago, I attended a lecture by a scholar who interpreted this passage in light of the history of human sacrifice.

It is hard for us to fully grasp how prevalent the practice of human sacrifice has been through human history. This was especially true in the ancient world. One of the Canaanite religions worshipped a deity called Moloch. Part of the religious practice involved building a huge fire and then throwing children into the flames as an act of devotion. In our reading from of Genesis, we learn that God does not desire human sacrifice, but rather substitutes animal sacrifice for human.

When the people of Israel entered the Promised Land, they encountered people who had successfully made a life in that land. They knew how to till the land. It must have been tempting for the Hebrews to follow the practices of others to insure their own success in the promised land. But they remembered this story of Abraham and when they built the temple in Jerusalem they did not offer human sacrifices.

More than five thousand years ago, the people of the covenant rejected human sacrifice. This is remarkable for how early this change occurred. I am in the middle of reading a book called *"The Viking Heart: How Scandinavians Conquered the World"* by Arthur Herman. Herman tells us that one of the benefits of Christianity coming to Sweden, Denmark and Norway in the 11th Century was putting an end to human sacrifice. Archeologists have found at Uppsala, the remains of thousands of people the Vikings sacrificed to Norse Gods. When Cortes and his rough men conquered the Aztecs only five hundred years ago, they were horrified at the brutality of the practice of human sacrifice that they discovered.

The good news is that today you would be hard pressed to find a place where the sacrifice of humans is acceptable. That good news began with the simple story of the Angel stopping Abrahams hand.

A second lens to use in reading this story is the ethical. Many Christians read Scripture asking what does this passage call me to do in my life. Much of the time we think that spiritual growth entails stopping doing things which are bad and doing things that are good. There is a lot of truth to this. But there are times that when good things get in the way of God's call on our lives.

In 1843, Soren Kierkegaard published a book of reflections on Genesis 22 called *Fear and Trembling*. Many commentators believe this book was written after the breakup of his engagement to his only love. Kierkegaard came to understand his calling by God was to be an outsider who called the church to repentance. It was a lonely unpopular calling that meant he would be alone. He, like Abraham, had to give up that which was close to his heart. Kierkegaard had to sacrifice what he thought might bring him happiness in order to serve God fully. He had to be willing to sacrifice his Isaac.

So, this passage can challenge us to look inside and ask "What keeps us from being more faithful to God?" What are those good things in our lives that we should be willing to sacrifice to serve Jesus more fully. For love is not a feeling of happiness, but rather Love is the willingness to sacrifice.

A third lens we can use in reading this passage is through the eyes of early Christians. In the first one thousand years of Christian history, Christians read the Old Testament looking for guidance to more fully understand Jesus and his mission in the world. This caused them to read the stories from Old Testament through a Christological lens.

In reading the 22nd chapter of Genesis they believed it helped inform their understanding of Good Friday. Caesarius of Arles tells us: **When Abraham offered his son Isaac, he was a type of God the Father, while Isaac prefigured our Lord and Savior.** One of the most brilliant minds of the 3rd Century was Origen. He commented on this passage – **That Isaac carried on himself “the wood for the burnt offering” is a figure, because Christ also “himself carried his own cross,” and yet to carry “the wood for the burnt offering” is the duty of a priest, He therefore becomes a victim and priest.**

This gives you a flavor of how these Christian interpreters approached this narrative. For them this passage prefigures the passion of Jesus. Abraham is God the Father and Isaac represents Jesus. When we think of this story in this way it can deepen our understanding of God’s love for us.

Think for a moment of the experience of Abraham. He was commanded by God to sacrifice his son. Isaac was Abraham’s hope for the future. It was through Isaac that the chosen people would be created. Think of the pain and distress he felt as they traveled for several days towards the holy spot. Abraham’s distress reflects the same pain and loss that God would have known in giving up Jesus on the cross. God could only endure this pain for the higher good of winning us his love. George Herbert reflected on this pain in his poem The Agony.

**Philosophers have measured mountains,
Fathomed the depths of seas, of states, and kings,
Walked with a staff to heaven, and traced fountains:
But there are two vast, spacious things,
The which to measure it doth more behoove:
Yet few there are that sound them: Sin and Love.**

**Who would know Sin, let him repair
Unto Mount Olivet; there shall he see
A man so wrung with pains, that all his hair,
His skin, his garments bloody be.
Sin is that press and vice, which forceth pain
To hunt his cruel food through every vein.**

**Who knows not Love, let him assay
And taste that juice, which on the cross a pike
Did set again abroach; then let him say
If ever he did taste the like.**

This passage from Genesis is difficult to grasp. The faithfulness of Abraham seems beyond human understanding. As we come to the table may we remember the love God has shown for us in sacrificing his Son. Remember the words that Herbert ends his poem

**Love is that liquor sweet and most divine,
Which my God feels as blood; but I, as wine.**