



# *Lakeside Sermons*

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

JUNE 29, 2014  
THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

## What's on Your Altar? Genesis 22:1-14; James 1:13-18

If he had known then what we know now, would Abraham have done it?

I am not talking about his looking back on what happened at Mount Moriah when he almost sacrificed his son. I wonder if, when he was a seventy-five year old herdsman in Haran, Abram (as he was called back then) had known that thirty or thirty-five years later he would be standing on a mountain holding a knife over his son's chest, would he have left his father's house to journey to a land God would show him. If he had known that this God, who was making promises too good to be true, would one day ask—no tell—him to sacrifice the son who was supposed to make all those promises come true, would he have packed up everything and left home to embark on an adventure of faith?

We like to say that hindsight is 20/20 because it is. At least we can look back and see what we want to see, like scrolling through a DVD to watch only the best parts of a movie. We can be selective with our memory and our choices, can't we? In fact, the writer of The Letter to the Hebrews looks back at Abraham and sees a far different man than the one I see on Mount Moriah or anywhere else in the Promised Land, for that matter:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval . . . By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised.

Hebrews 11:1-2, 8-11

We do consider Abraham “the father of our faith,” but he did not always act out of faith. When Sarah caught Pharaoh’s eye as they passed by Egypt, Abraham acted out of fear when he told the Egyptian ruler that she was his sister. It was not entirely a lie for she was actually his half-sister (A story for another day!), but he failed to mention that she was also his wife because he was afraid Pharaoh would kill him in order to have Sarah for himself. Pharaoh took Sarah into his house and lavished Abraham with livestock, but the Egyptian and his household were soon hit with various plagues as punishment for this moral misstep. Pharaoh was livid when he discovered the truth and quickly sent Abraham, Sarah, and all their entourage packing (Genesis 12). Apparently Abraham did not learn his lesson, for a similar incident is reported involving Abim’elech, king of Gerar (Genesis 20).

Understandably, Abraham questioned the news that he and Sarah would finally have a son. After all, he was nearing 100 years of age and Sarah was close to 90. They had been trying to have a child for the past 75 years or so and nothing had worked. They laughed at the suggestion that they would become parents in their Geritol years.

Clearly, Abraham did not act in faith when he took Hagar, Sarah’s handmaid, as a surrogate mother for his child Ishmael. That detour was not in God’s plan nor was the banishment of the two into the desert.

It is true, as the writer of Hebrews said, that Abraham did leave his father’s house and follow God to an unknown land. It is true that despite taking matters into his own hands a few times, he did believe God would use his offspring to build a great nation. It is also true that he endured difficult living conditions for decades as he waited for the promise to be fulfilled.

I wonder, then, why Abraham so quickly and without hesitation, packed up and headed off to sacrifice Isaac when God chose to test him. Earlier, when God threatened to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham protested and bargained with God (Genesis 19). Why did he not protest when God told him to sacrifice Isaac? “God, you must be kidding. Isaac is the son of promise. He is the one you will use to make this great nation and bless the people of the earth. Why would you take all that away now? Surely you want to re-think this one, God!”

Abraham, however, said nothing. Was that faith? Was it madness, as some believers have noted? Was it confusion? If Abraham had known his faith would put him in that kind of position, would he have ever left home?

It is dangerous to try and get into the mind of biblical characters or even of God. We can project our own fears and doubts and misunderstandings into people who lived ages ago. Besides, the text tells us what the writer wants us to know. God tested Abraham. What was the test, and did Abraham pass or fail?

We know that human sacrifice was common in Abraham's day. It was a regular practice among the Canaanite people, neighbors to the Hebrews. Although God clearly condemned the practice, it is evident that at times God's people participated in the sacrifice of humans, particularly their children.

In the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, we read:  
"You shall not give any of your offspring to sacrifice them to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord."  
Leviticus 18:21

"No one shall be found among you who makes a son or daughter pass through fire . . . ." Deuteronomy 18:10

The Psalmist sang, "They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to the demons; they poured out innocent blood, the blood of their sons and daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan; and the land was polluted with blood." Psalm 106:37-38

Jeremiah prophesied:  
"For the people of Israel and the people of Judah have done nothing but evil in my sight from their youth; the people of Israel have done nothing but provoke me to anger by the work of their hands, says the Lord . . . They built the high places of Baal in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to offer up their sons and daughters to Molech, though I did not command them, nor did it enter my mind that they should do this abomination, causing Judah to sin.  
Jeremiah 32:30, 35

Micah wrestled with whether or not God desired sacrifice at all:  
"Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" Micah 6:7

These writings obviously occurred long after the time of Abraham, but the religion of cause and effect, one that demanded sacrifice in order to ward off tragedy or to insure prosperity, was rampant throughout the Middle East in his day. Children were sacrificed to appease the gods so that misfortune might not fall upon the people. Yet, what greater misfortune could there be than to give up one's child to a god who demanded blood?

To read the story of Isaac's near sacrifice ought to be a chilling experience. Today we would arrest the man, place Isaac in protective custody, and investigate Sarah to determine whether or not she is a fit mother. Yet, tradition suggests that we should consider Abraham to be the exemplar of our faith.

I read about a divinity school student identified only as Lyn who was struggling to prepare a sermon on this text. Her preaching professor observed,

[Lyn] "gave up trying to make this text into something beautiful and uplifting and simply wept. She wept not only just for the characters in the story but also for herself and for her culture . . . [she] "gave her congregation permission that the text had not given Abraham: to weep for the tragic situations of their own lives, for the horrible choices they feel they have no choice but to make."<sup>1</sup>

This student-preacher's reaction to the near sacrifice of Isaac reminded me of another biblical story of sacrifice. Jephthah was a mighty warrior whose story is told in the Book of Judges. Before he went into battle he made a vow to God. He said, "If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the Lord's, to be offered up by me as a burnt offering" (Judges 11:30-31). Jephthah did defeat the Ammonites, but to his great dismay, when he returned home, it was his daughter who came dancing out of his house to celebrate his triumph. Because he had made a vow to God, Jephthah felt bound to sacrifice his daughter, his only child, as an offering to the Lord. Surely he wept for the horrible choice he felt he had no choice but to make. But can we believe God was pleased?

---

<sup>1</sup>Julia O'Brien, *Challenging Prophetic Metaphor: Theology and Ideology in the Prophets*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 59; as quoted in Juliana Claassens, "Commentary on Genesis 22:1-14," *Working Preacher* (June 26, 2011); available online at: [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org).

Maybe God was testing Abraham to see if he had what it was going to take to be the father of a new nation of God's people. Maybe God was testing Abraham because Abraham had proved inconsistent thus far. As I mentioned earlier, Abraham's track record in the "acting in faith" department was not very good. Did Abraham pass? I am not convinced that he did. At the last possible moment, God intervened through an angel screaming Abraham's name to stop the hand holding the knife from plunging into the heart of Isaac, the child of promise. Rembrandt drew a sketch of this scene. We see Isaac, bound and lying on top of an altar ready to be lit. Abraham, with knife unsheathed, is poised to thrust downward. An angel grabs Abraham from behind, strong hands gripping his wrists as he desperately restrains Abraham from killing his son.

The angel tells Abraham that he knows the patriarch-to-be fears God since he did not withhold Isaac from him. It sounds like a passing grade, but what about faith? Fear of God, even if defined as reverence for God, is not the same as trusting God completely. Abraham almost gave up the child of promise because he did not believe his own words. Do you remember what Abraham said when Isaac asked about the lamb for the sacrifice? Abraham told his son that God would provide the lamb. Abraham seemed to forget that the core promise which God had made long ago in Haran and had kept faithfully was that God would provide. At each juncture of his journey of faith, when Abraham acted out of fear rather than faith, God always provided. Once again on the mountain, God provided a ram for the sacrifice so that the son of promise would live.

The professor of the student-preacher who had wept over Abraham's dilemma suggests that the young minister, by her tears, had proclaimed good news. She reminded her congregation—and us—that we are given this story in scripture because we are Abraham. If we are Abraham, what does this unsettling story reveal about us?

There is something about sacrifice—not human sacrifice necessarily—but sacrifice in general that appeals to us. It seems noble and admirable when we give up something for the sake of the greater good or to express gratitude or simply to demonstrate how noble we think we are. We give medals to people who make great sacrifice. We reward people who sacrifice for the sake of others.

We make sacrifices for our family to provide a safe home, food, comforts, and education. Perhaps we take a second job or work longer hours

or go without something that we might like to have. If we are not careful, however, we can sacrifice precious time and meaningful relationships with our family in an effort to provide for them.

We make sacrifices for our career in order to do the best job we can, get the position we deserve, and make the contributions we feel are important. In the pursuit of those goals, however, we sometimes sacrifice our health, our relationships, and even our integrity. In order to get what we want, we sometimes lose what we need.

We make sacrifices for our community and our country in order to foster a better life, prosperity, and opportunities for all people. Too often, however, we see good people choose to sacrifice their principles, give away justice, disregard fairness, and ignore obvious needs. Ambition and greed can lead to the sacrifice of core values.

I have to wonder if Abraham did not succumb to the pressures of the culture which surrounded him and to his own still-immature faith in order to do something bold and extravagant to court God's favor? Did the prevalence of child sacrifice, even the urging of his neighbors, convince him that he, too, would have to give up his child for the sake of the greater good? Did his own insecurity prompt him to give up the greatest gift God had given him? Was he still learning to trust God even after all those years?

Sacrifice is honorable when we give of ourselves for the sake of someone else, but not when we give up someone else for our own sake. People do sacrifice their own life in order to save the life of someone else. We admire such selflessness, and rightly so. But it is not right to sacrifice someone else in any way to improve our own lot in life. That is what was about to happen on Mount Moriah.

If Abraham had paid attention all along his journey, he would have believed his own advice: God will provide. Time and time again he did not trust God to provide until it was almost too late. On Mount Moriah, the angel of God finally shouted loudly enough to get Abraham's attention. He stopped what he was about to do and noticed the ram caught in a thicket—God's provision. Imagine if Isaac's laughter had been heard no more!

God will provide. That is the story from beginning to end. In the book of Genesis, the Creator God provides everything that is. When Hagar and Ishmael were sent out into the desert to die, God provided water and a wife

and a future for them and their people. When Isaac was about to lose his life and the promise was about to be nixed, God provided a ram for the sacrifice. And when the world needed to see how far God would go to love us, Jesus was there, not as a sacrifice offered on our behalf, but as God giving himself completely for us. It was not an act of appeasement but the gift of God's love and a demonstration of the power of life over death.

What have you placed on your altar? What are you willing to sacrifice for your own sake? Do you believe that God will provide whatever you need? Before you sacrifice something precious in your life, consider what God may be hiding in a thicket that will provide exactly what you need for life.

If he had known back then what we know now, would Abraham have ever begun that journey of faith? Let's hope so for in the end he did prove faithful and set for us an example of the resilience of faith and the faithfulness of God. Amen.

We gather here week by week, Holy God, because in the midst of the challenges and tensions and uncertainties of life, we know that in this sacred place and among these our brothers and sisters is where we should be. We gather to experience your presence through the nurturing of your Holy Spirit, to hear an inspiring word or melody that might cause our hearts to soar above the mundane concerns of the day, and to receive an encouraging word or embrace that will reassure us that we are cared for and accepted. We gather because in this world of conflict and confusion, we need to be reminded of the peace which only you can bring and to hear again the good news that your truth will set us free.

Even while we come with gratitude for the abundance of these gifts and all the loving-kindness you offer to us, O Lord, we confess that we also come with reservations. We are called to be your disciples, but yours can be a costly discipleship, sometimes requiring of us more than we bargained for. Your never-ending streams of mercy call forth our hymns of praise, and your amazing love inspires us to offer our souls, our lives, our all, yet we often feel inadequate to live out the demands of the gospel. You call us to extend welcome and a cup of cold water to others in your name, yet our suspicion of the other causes us to hesitate to be hospitable and our scarcity mentality convinces us that our resources are inadequate to meet the needs around us. We hear the difficult truths of your word and are confronted by the teachings of Jesus which challenge our assumptions and nudge us from our comfortable places. We sense the stirring of your Spirit who will not leave well enough alone, who nestles deep within our souls and seeks to transform us in ways that are both inviting and unsettling. And so we begin to wonder whether we have the strength or the courage to claim the name of Christ and to live as your disciples at all.

Create us anew, Loving God, that we might recognize and live the fullness of your image within us. Cleanse and redeem us, Merciful Christ, that we might become suitable vessels, fragile though we are, to carry your gospel to the world you came to love and serve. Fill and empower us, Renewing Spirit, that we might be equipped to respond to the needs around us out of the abundance we have been given. Grant us the strength to do the work of discerning your will. Grant us the wisdom to reject anything that hinders the joyful and abundant life you intend for us. And grant us the courage to reach out beyond ourselves to extend mercy wherever we find suffering, always remembering that in your kingdom, we must lose ourselves in order to find our true life in you.

We give witness to our faith that we do not travel this journey alone, as we pray in the name of the Risen Christ who came to dwell among us and by the power of the Holy Spirit who abides with us still. Amen.