

“But Where Is the Lamb for a Burnt Offering?”

Genesis 22:1-14 • Psalm 13 • Romans 6:12-23 • Matthew 10:40-42

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

July 2, 2023

5th Sunday after Pentecost

Today we consider yet another complicated and uncomfortable story about the faith ancestor of three great world religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It would be nice if the stories we read and hear about in the Bible always made us feel *good* about our ancestors in the faith; nice if the primary actors in the Bible – both in the Old and New Testaments – always did things that are unquestionably *good* and that don't make us squirm. Alas, that is not what the Bible is; it is not a collection of stories about perfect people. It is, rather, a collection of stories about a whole lot of *imperfect* people, people with *flaws*, people like *us* ... and about a God who calls us *all* to faithfulness.

It would also be nice if everything God directed these imperfect people to *do* always felt good and right. Alas, that is also not the case; some of the things God asks people to do feel ... somewhat ... *questionable*. They sometimes make us question God's *character*, God's *justice*. They make us *think*.

Such is the case with the near-sacrifice of Isaac. God said to Abraham, “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.” If that doesn't give you pause ... well, it should.

Now there are those who say that the God of the Old Testament is not the same as the God of the New, that the God of the Old Testament is an angry and wrathful god, while the God of the New Testament is a god of love. Let me nip that line of thought in the bud. That *is not* what Christianity says. Christianity says that the God of the Old Testament is the *same exact God* that we know in the New Testament. The notion that God's anger and wrath is solely confined to the Old Testament is patently *false*, and could only be said by someone who doesn't really know the New Testament; and the notion that God's love can only be found in the *New* Testament is also patently false, and could only be said by someone who doesn't really know the *Old* Testament. Indeed, the notion that the God of the Old Testament is not the same as the God of the New was condemned as a *heresy* in the early centuries of the church. Make no mistake: the God who told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac is the *same god* who came to Earth in Jesus Christ, and whom we worship and serve today. *Our God* did that. So we need to understand *why*, as best we can. We need to try to figure out what this story *means*.

Let's back up to verse 1. “After these things God tested Abraham.” Right from the start, we are told that this was a *test* on God's part, a test of Abraham's *faith*. Now, think back to what we've been talking about in recent weeks. God told Abraham to leave his homeland in Mesopotamia and go to the land of Canaan. Abraham did that, unquestioningly. God told Abraham that he would have as many descendants as there are stars in the sky, despite the fact that he was over 75 years old, and his wife was barren. Abraham believed that, initially – for which God gave Abraham a whole ton of credit.

But as time went on, and they continued childless, Abraham seems to have had some doubts. At the age of 85, Abraham agrees to Sarah's plan that he should father a child with her slave girl. And at the age of 99, when God reiterated to Abraham that he *and Sarah* would have a child, Abraham fell on his face and *laughed*. His disbelief was palpably evident when he wondered: "Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" He is thinking, *no, that's just not possible*. He is doubting God's word. He is doubting God's *integrity*. But Abraham is wrong. Sarah ultimately conceives and gives birth to a son, Isaac. Their *only* son, the one they have been waiting for, literally, for *decades*. God *is* as good as God's word ... eventually ... *in God's own time*.

So now, some years later, *God tests Abraham*. Abraham had previously had two truly great moments of faithfulness, but he had also demonstrated some degree of doubt, and he had made some poor decisions along the way. Maybe God needed to see whether – after everything that had happened – Abraham still *trusted* God. Or maybe, this story is here to test *us*, to see whether – after everything that has happened in *our* lives – we still trust in God ... trust in God's goodness, faithfulness, and love.

The instructions are clear: "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." We don't know how old Isaac is at the time this story takes place. He is old enough to walk a three-day journey into the mountains. He is also old enough to carry all the wood for the burnt offering on the last, hilly day of the journey – and that would have been quite a bundle of wood. I've seen estimates ranging from "12 years old or younger" all the way up to 37 years old, which is how old he was when his mother Sarah died, sometime after this story. An old Jewish tradition, stretching back to at least the first century AD and recorded by the Jewish historian Josephus, says that Isaac was 25 years old at the time of this story. In the narrative, Abraham and God both refer to Isaac as a "boy," but the Hebrew word *na'ar* doesn't necessarily mean a *young* child; it could refer to any male between birth and young adulthood. That same word *na'ar* is also used to refer to Abraham's servants, who were probably "young men;" the implication is that Isaac could have been about the same age as them. I'm inclined to think that Isaac was probably an older teenager, or a young adult, perhaps somewhere between 17 and 25 ... which means that Isaac was probably strong enough to overcome his father and break his way *out* of this situation, if he wanted to. He could literally just *run away*. The fact that he *didn't* fight or try to break away when Abraham started binding him to the wood is significant. It strongly suggests that Isaac *trusted* his father. His *earthly* father ... and his heavenly Father too.

Isaac only asks one question: "Father ... The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham replies simply: "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." Isaac doesn't question any further, "and the two of them walked on together."

What happens next is told very matter-of-factly: "When 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 and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son." He was really going to do it. He was ready and willing to kill his son. To do *as God willed*.

We need to pause here and just marvel at the *horror* of it all. Fathers, obviously, shouldn't kill their children. The first recorded sin, after Adam and Eve were expelled from paradise, was *murder* within the first human family, when "Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him." God cried out: "What have you done? Listen, your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground!" God cried out at that sin, that injustice – and here God is telling Abraham to do something just as bad. *And Abraham was willing to do it*. Willing to commit *murder*, the *murder of his son*, in the name of God.

But, thankfully, that didn't happen. This was all a *test*, remember? God had a *plan* all along. An angel of the Lord cries out: "Abraham, Abraham! ... Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." The crisis is averted. Abraham has passed the test. He puts down the knife. And *God delivers*. "Abraham looked up and 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." They worship and feast on the mountain.

This is a difficult story. There is no question about that. God asked Abraham to do an unspeakable thing, and Abraham was willing to do it. All the promises that God had given to Abraham about the descendants that would be born to him through Isaac had been in jeopardy. But Abraham had enough faith and trust in God to do *whatever God asked* ... no matter how horrific.

In the New Testament, this is lifted up as a positive example of faith. The epistle of James talks about how *faith* needs to manifest itself in *works*, that is, in *deeds*, in things that believers *do*. James says: "Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and by works faith was brought to completion." The epistle to the Hebrews also lifts this up as a positive example: "By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom he had been told, 'It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you.' He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—and, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back." That last line suggests that Abraham believed that *God could raise people from the dead*. Which, of course, God *can*. The witness of the scriptures is that God will raise *all* the faithful from the dead, that death does not have the last word over our lives, that when that fateful day comes for us – as it nearly did for Isaac that day, in the mountains of Moriah – *God will raise us to new life*. This is made possible, of course, by the sacrifice of *Jesus*, by the way he offered up his life for all of us.

And that brings us to a very interesting, and often overlooked, connection. Where did this near-sacrifice of Isaac occur? In the mountains of Moriah. Where did the sacrifice of *Jesus* occur? In the mountains of Moriah. These events took place in pretty much *the same spot*. How do we know that? The word "Moriah" occurs only twice in the entire Bible. Once is here, in this story. The other is in the book of 2 Chronicles, where we are told that Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem "on Mount Moriah." When God sent Abraham to a certain place to offer his son as a sacrifice, God sent him *to the very mountains where Jerusalem now stands*. Just as Abraham was willing to offer up his son, his "only son," his beloved son, as a sacrifice in the mountains of Moriah, so too was God willing to offer up *his Son*, his only Son, his beloved Son, as a sacrifice *in the very same mountains*. God spared *one* of those sons, but not the other. Indeed, God *had* to spare the son of Abraham, because the Son of God is also the Son of Abraham, *through Isaac*. Isaac's *life* was necessary for Jesus's *death*.

Maybe Isaac knew that God had some much larger purpose at work here. Maybe that's why he didn't fight his father, why he didn't try to run away from the sacrificial altar. Maybe he knew that God had a *purpose* for his life. Maybe that's why he asked the prescient question: "where is the *lamb* for a burnt offering?" When the angel spoke and prevented Abraham from carrying out the sacrifice of his son, God didn't provide a *lamb*. God provided a *ram*. Those aren't the same thing. A *ram* is a male sheep that has reached maturity; a *lamb* is a young sheep that has not. In the *original* sacrifice at the mountains of Moriah, God provided a *ram*, not a lamb. In the *ultimate* sacrifice at the mountains of Moriah, God provided a *lamb*, not a ram – "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Isaac was expecting God to provide a *lamb*. He was *right*. God *would*, eventually, provide a Lamb.

© 2023 Rev. Bill Pinches