

Pastor's Message – 6/28/2020  
 Genesis 22:1-14

We started our journey through the Book of Genesis three weeks with the wonderful story of God the Creator – creating something wonderful out of nothing and bringing order out of chaos. But since then, we have had three very confusing and even horrible stories.

Two weeks ago, three visitors come to visit Abraham and the LORD tells Abraham and Sarah that by the time they return, Abraham, at age 100, and Sarah, at age 89, will have had a son. Preposterous! Unbelievable! And Sarah laughs – laughter of disbelief which turns into laughter of joy.

Last week, in a pique of jealousy, Sarah forces Abraham to send Hagar and their son, Ishmael, off into the desert to die. And God allows it to happen. This week, in what is arguably the second most horrible story in the Bible, God tells Abraham to kill his son Isaac as a sacrifice! Who are these people? Are these the Biblical characters we look up to and try to imitate? Is this the God that we follow and to whom we pledge our lives?

“God told me to.”

This is a bizarre story and a difficult one to preach today to congregations with modern and commendable sensibilities. If anyone would suggest that God told them to take their child and kill the child in a ritualistic religious ceremony, we'd hope that someone would call 911 immediately. It's also problematic for Christians, because we do not believe that God tests or tempts a person to do evil — as the murder of a child certainly is (see James 1:13). So, this text is a difficult text, even though it is one of the most well-known stories in the Bible. But, that said, it is also a foundational story because of its obvious foreshadowing of the crux of the Christian faith — what happened not on Mount Moriah, but Mount Calvary; foundational also because it is lifted up as an example of Abraham's faith (see Hebrews 11:17, 19); and foundational because it gives us the timeless principle that “The Lord will provide” (v. 14).

God is our Rock, our Refuge, our Strength. God is the One who deals bountifully with us whether we deserve it or not. In Scripture, God is the Creator who made light and life, brought worlds into being and cast the stars into the skies.

And then ... this?

"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."

“God told me to.”

All the while, we can't for the life of us figure out how the characters are going to get out of this horrendous situation. And our very souls feel a little queasy as we squirm in our seats and think, "This is all wrong. Since when is God so diabolical? Since when is father Abraham such a monster?" There is no way to soften this story. You have to feel some sense of moral outrage. This is a strange, strange story. A command to kill a son. An obedient father. An example of great faith (vv. 15-18).

“God told me to.”

"I know that you fear God." To fear God means to obey with no guarantee of reward. It could be called "blind obedience," or "dumb obedience."

“God told me to.”

The whole idea of God requiring a human sacrifice is totally foreign to our understanding of God. But we must remember that Abraham lived in Canaan about 4,000 years ago, in a time and

place where the sacrifice of children was practiced by many of the other peoples around him. They did so in hopes of appeasing gods they thought of as angry or unpredictable. Also, Abraham did not have benefit of much previous knowledge of God. He did not have the Old Testament. He did not have the Mosaic laws, including the Ten Commandments, which weren't given until some 650 year later. He lived in a culture that believed in many gods, and so he was just learning what the LORD God, whom the Bible calls *Yahweh* (among other names), was like. Therefore, this idea to offer his son did not astonish Abraham. He probably believed that God had as much right to ask for Abraham's son as his neighbors' gods did of theirs.

So Abraham prepared to obey, but then, at the last minute, God stopped him from killing his son and directed him to instead sacrifice a ram caught in a thicket nearby.

What is of interest for us this morning is what happened to Abraham's understanding of God. When the angel stopped him from slaying his son, the angel said, "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."

At that moment, Abraham understood that the whole incident was a test of faith, and he realized that it was not God's will that he should offer his child as a sacrifice. He learned that what God wanted instead was trust and obedience. This new awareness was an important point in not only Abraham's personal development but also in the entire Judeo-Christian history ever thereafter. The Old Testament Israelites rejected the whole practice of human sacrifice, and Christians today believe that every human being is valuable in God's sight.

But to return to Abraham: What happened to him in that incident was a breakdown of an old idea about God -- that he was as bloodthirsty as the gods of Abraham's neighbors -- and the breakthrough of a new understanding of God that placed Yahweh above other gods.

But perhaps Abraham misinterpreted God's voice. If the norm for all the tribes in Canaan at that time was child sacrifice, especially sacrifice of the first-born son, perhaps Abraham was simply doing his duty as he saw it. Perhaps he was fulfilling the expectations of society by offering Isaac as a burnt sacrifice. Perhaps Abraham assumed that God, like all the many other gods in the prevailing culture, required child sacrifice. But when he came to make the sacrifice, Abraham felt trapped into it with little or no real choice. And perhaps it was at this point that God intervened, saying in effect that he was not like other gods, for he would never require any human sacrifice, much less the sacrifice of a child.

Abraham was presented with new information. To deal with it, he had to let his thinking processes override his old ideas and perceptions. The old ideas broke down because they were found to be inconsistent with new information. That was a spiritual giant step forward for Abraham.

It wasn't just Abraham, but also the Israelites, God's chosen people, who grew in their understanding of who God was and what God expected of them. They grew in their knowledge of the love of God. Child sacrifice was a common practice in the ancient world. Archeologists have often found the bones of small children under the doorways of prehistoric and some historic homes. The oldest child was sometimes sacrificed as a way of seeking protection for the family.

In 800 B.C., in the time of the prophet Elisha, when the king of Moab was losing a great battle to the Israelite army and knew that there was no hope for victory, he "took his firstborn son who was to succeed him, and offered him as a burnt offering on the wall. And great wrath came upon Israel, so they withdrew from him and returned to their own land." (2 Kings 3:27).

Some will lift up Hebrews 13.8 as their proof text where it says, "Jesus Christ is the same

yesterday, today, and forever.” It is not God who changes; it is that our understanding of God changes as we come to know God better as a God of love who desires only the best for His people. In reading the Bible one needs to continually remember that the God presented in it is God *as understood by the writers*. It is not God whose divinity evolves over the pages of the Old and New Testament, but human insight into who God is.

Change and growth are part of God’s creation. Take the dragonfly for example. There are stages in the life of a dragonfly. Some say that the dragonfly lives for only a short time and, it is true, the adult dragonfly may only live for several months up to 6 months and most of its life is spent as an aquatic larval nymph. It is only when the adult dragonfly appears that its full beauty and potential is realized.

Think of the image of an insect in the larva stage. It has a shell, but as it grows, the shell becomes too tight. Eventually the shell cracks and the insect sheds it and grows a larger shell. Many of our ideas of God and our understandings of what it means to live a Christian life are like that shell. They suit us for a while, but eventually, if we are to mature, our ideas must allow for some expansion.

That same principle of old ideas breaking down and new ones breaking through is still a major way in which we grow spiritually as individuals and in which the church grows in its understanding of what it means to be the body of Christ in the world.

The church's experience in the last couple of centuries is instructive. There was a time when many in the church thought that races could not worship together. We have, thankfully, rethought that idea.

There was a time when a majority of people honestly believed that women were unfit for many jobs traditionally held by men, including church leadership positions, until some women came along and did those jobs well. Then the old concept did not fit the new information. So, the old concept broke down and the new concept broke through.

It took new information, arguments from experience, and some brave persons pioneering a new way that helped us as a church to see that certain old ideas were no longer helpful. Eventually, former understandings broke down and new ones broke through.

It is not that we usually go looking for some new concept. Instead, we actually hold tightly onto the ones we are already comfortable with until we reach some point where they become untenable, inconsistent, or unworkable -- or until some new light is shed on the subject.

For example, in our individual lives, God as we envision him now, should be different from how we envisioned God when we were children. We adults cannot easily worship the concept of God that exists in the mind of a child unless we are prepared to deny our own experience of life.

Abraham is called to obey, but obedience must be based on something. It can be based on fear -- I'll get punished if I don't follow orders. Our trust in God, our understanding of God evolves over a lifetime of learning about God and who God is. Our faith develops and grows based on the words of Scripture, the traditions of the church, our own God-given reason, and our experience of the wisdom of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives.

As we read through the Bible, we see more and more examples of how God reveals Himself to us. Consider Jeremiah 32.35, “The one true God makes no such demand” that is, for child sacrifice.

In fact, the story of the binding of Isaac may have been developed to make that fact clear, to set our God apart from all those gods that were born of ignorance and superstition, to make it clear that our God was different. He did not require the sacrifice of children, and often he did not

require the sacrifice of any "thing" at all.

Look to the words of the prophets:

\* "For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings" (Hosea 6:6 NIV).

\* "What do I care about incense from Sheba or sweet calamus from a distant land? Your burnt offerings are not acceptable; your sacrifices do not please me" (Jeremiah 6:20 NIV).

\* And from Isaiah 1: "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?" says the LORD; "I have had enough of burnt-offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.... Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (Isaiah 1:11, 16-17).

Not our goods nor our children does God want -- but only that we "love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." And that we "keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart." And that we "recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise" (Deuteronomy 6:4-6 NIV). Jesus will later reduce the 10 Commandments to two, "You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all our soul, all your strength, and all you mind." And, "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Luke 10.27)

As we read these ancient words from the Book of Genesis today, and walk with Abraham and Isaac along the steep and winding mountain path, we come to experience the wonder and the dread of an encounter with the God whose name cannot be uttered. The story speaks to us on a deep, emotional level.

The God who speaks to Abraham before he climbs Mount Moriah is a fierce, unpredictable, even dangerous deity. Yet the God who speaks to him *after* his ascent, on the mountaintop -- graciously pointing out the ram in the thicket -- is a God who is compassionate, even kind. Perhaps this story highlights the historical transition from human to animal sacrifice, and the corresponding transition from a terrifying deity who must be appeased, to a God of love who does whatever is necessary to save the people.

Perhaps this story might encourage us to ask what kind of God we expect and who is the God we know? It may help us to move from an understanding of a God of wrath who is out to get us to a God who offers blessing and grace and loves us unconditionally, always wanting to be closer to us as we grow closer to Him.

What strongly held convictions that arise from our faith are becoming too tight and beginning to break down? What gut reactions need to be overridden by our rational thought processes? Could any of that be God calling us to grow? What new understandings are trying to break through?

The answers to those things are found in prayer, in study, in experience, and in thought -- all of which are tools God has given us to help us grow in faith and walk in the way of Jesus. We are called -- to come ever closer and to know God as a God of love and forgiveness, called to grow in knowledge and love of the Lord and then to share that knowledge and love with others. Knowing God as a God of love helps us to become who God has created us to be -- people of a dragonfly faith.