

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, July 09, 2017
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Genesis 22:1-14; John 3:13-17
“The sacrifice of a son”

The reading from the Old Testament this morning starts with: “After all these things God tested Abraham. The “these things” this verse refers to, were the many decades that Abraham and his wife Sarah had waited for the birth of a son, the son that God had promised them. Abraham and Sarah had agonized over their barrenness. In fact some years before, they decided to help God out by taking things in their own hand. They resorted to the use of a surrogate in the person of Hagar, Sarah’s Egyptian servant, who bore Abraham a son they called Ishmael. But God had made it clear that the son of promise would come through Sarah. Finally, miraculously she conceived and bore Isaac in her old age; Abraham was 100 and Sarah was 90.

Some more years passed and Isaac had grown into a young man. Then God comes to Abraham with a test; to sacrifice his son Isaac. It’s a shocking story. It tests all our sensibilities and is contrary to everything we know about God. Although human sacrifice was common at the time, it is an abomination to God. So how could He be asking for it here? What kind of God would ask that? Not the God we know.

People today, as in centuries gone by, have problems with God’s request of Abraham; problems with understanding it, problems with accepting it, problems with interpreting it. Scholars have debated and marvelled over this story throughout the centuries, just as have ordinary people like you and I.

The feelings that we have, they fuel our questions, our debate: Our sense of horror as Abraham sets on his trek, Isaac beside him. The awful suspense when, near to the end of that trek, the knife is about to descend. our sense of relief when, God speaks and stops Abraham and indeed provides the sacrifice for the alter which Abraham has built.

A lot of feelings and a lot of thoughts are evoked by this story: thoughts and feelings about God and thoughts and feelings about Abraham.

What kind of Father was Abraham? What kind of man could offer up his own son? Should he really be held up as a model of faith for us all? Powerful, potent, questions. Powerful, potent, feelings. And yet consider. In the midst of your thoughts and feelings the story for what is; a story of faith and trust in God.

God knows all things, including our future; He knows what happens in the end, right from the beginning. He knew what Abraham would do. This test was not for God’s sake, but for Abraham’s. God knew that Abraham’s faith was true; Abraham needed to know it. More importantly, we who read the story now, need to know it as well.

The test was an evaluation of Abraham’s love. What was his true love? Did he love God more or did he love his son more. Often we love the gifts of God more than we love God himself. We love what God does for us more than the fact that God wants to have a personal relationship with us. We need to ask ourselves: If the Lord withdrew His blessings from us, would we still love him? Would we still pursue him?

Would we stay connected with Him? Would we seek Him out for conversation? Would we stay loyal to Him? Would we still say that's my God?

Abraham is reckoned to be a righteous because he believed what God said and acted upon it. People freak out that God would request the sacrifice of a life, but aren't we are all a living sacrifice. God requires that you and I die to ourselves, deny ourselves, put God first and do what he asks of us. That is the faith that Abraham had. Isn't that is the faith we should aspire to have.

When Abraham finally reaches Mount Moriah he tells his two servants, "stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship and then We will come back to you." I always thought that Abraham said this to his servants so that he would alleviate any suspicions that they might have. But in Hebrews 11, where faith is described in great detail, versus 17 -19 say:

"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."

Abraham had complete faith in God's promise. He may not have understood what God wanted him to do, but he trusted God completely. Abraham reasoned that God would resurrect Isaac from the dead. Abraham had learnt that God keeps His word. Isaac was supposed to be the avenue through which the great nation was to arise from Abraham. This couldn't happen if Isaac were to die.

What faith had this man, this man whose son came from God by a promise? What faith had this man, who, as he leads that son towards what seems to be his certain death, says to him that God would provide the sacrifice?

We may not understand why God tested Abraham, but do we not understand that fact that tests come to us? Do we not pray each day as Jesus taught us "Save us from the time of trial"?

I hope that we would never have to face this trial, this test. I hope that we are never asked, in the name of God, to give up our children. But I do hope that we would respond as Abraham did, with complete faith and trust in God. Right now, I don't know what you're struggling against, what you are dealing with, but whatever it is God will provide. You belong to Him. He longs to be gracious to you. He has you safely in his hands. And from the moment we decide to trust and believe in him, ad realise we are under His care, then anything can be and will be actualized.

Then He said, "Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love," This is the first time the word "love" is used in the Bible. There is a rule of Bible interpretation called "First Use." The Rule of First Use says that the first occurrence of a word or idea sets the tone and pace for that thing throughout the rest of Scripture. It may grow over time and as we track it through the Bible, but it never leaves that foundation.

Here, the first use of the word love doesn't refer to romantic love, or even our love for God or His love for us; it's a father's love for his son! God emphasizes the fact the Abraham loved his son Isaac. It seems almost cruel in light of what He tells Abraham to do with Isaac. "Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love" But Isaac wasn't his only son; what about Ishmael the son of Hagar? It wasn't that God had forgotten about Ishmael or denied him as Abraham's son. God had also promised to bless Ishmael and

make a great nation of his descendants. Rather, God is speaking words that are meant to move Abraham and us who read them to realize there's more going on here than meets the eye. Why would God call Isaac the only Son and then identify Abraham's intense love for him, if the next words were a command to slay him?

This place that Abraham called Jehovah Jireh, at the end of the story, was Mount Moriah and means "God will provide". It is the very place that God had directed him to. It's name was later changed to Calvary and became the site of our Lord's crucifixion. This test for Abraham, the sacrifice of his only son, the son he loved so much, was a foreshadowing of the greater sacrifice God the Father would make of His dearly beloved only Son on the cross.

These two events took place at the very same spot. And even though Abraham was told to offer his son just as The Heavenly Father offered His Son, it ended very differently for Isaac; and in that difference lies the great lesson for us. Once Abraham's faith was demonstrated by his obedience, God stayed the sacrificial knife, and provided a substitute for Isaac. That lamb Abraham offered in his place represents the final substitute for all people that God would later bring to that same place in the person of Jesus who died for all of us, as our substitute! "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

What about Isaac. At this point in time, Isaac is determined to be between the ages of 17 and 37 years old. He is definitely old enough to overpower his 130 year old father. Isaac does not need to be sacrificed unless he wanted to be. Yet he willingly allows himself to be bound. He was willing to be that sacrifice, just as Jesus willingly went to the cross for us. Jesus sacrificed himself so that we might be saved.

Jesus, who was without sin, willingly took on all of our sins for us. He came to earth so we didn't have to face the ramifications of our sins. All he asks of us is to: "love God with all our heart, and all our soul, and all our mind, and all our strength." Loving God in this way, loving God more than we love ourselves, more than we love our family is not easy. Taking up a cross is not pleasant, it is work. Indeed it is work we have to do each and every day.

The story of Abraham ends with Isaac being restored him. For the God who asked Abraham to give up his son, and who then gave the son back to him, ends up giving up his own son; giving him up out of love for us, as Abraham was prepared to give up Isaac out of love for God.

And in the process of God giving up his son Jesus for us, something marvellous happens. His son comes back to him, as did Abraham's. He comes back to him and in coming back to him, brings all of us to God, each and every one of us.

We celebrate God having provided the perfect sacrifice. We celebrate God giving back to us not only our children and their children after them, but God giving back to us the very life that we owe to him.

There is a mystery to God; a mystery to Christ. His suffering redeems our suffering and through him, our suffering also redeems the world. People can talk and debate and argue about what God might or might not expect of us, they can go on for hours about how a loving God would never ask Abraham to give us

Isaac. And much of the debate is good. But good, or bad, the fundamental fact is that in the situation in which Abraham found himself, and in the situations in which we find ourselves, God has provided and will provide for us all that we need. All that we need, not necessarily what we want.

Yes, God is a mystery, but God is a mystery of love. A mystery of love that calls me to give up all that I treasure, even myself, and then provides to me something that is so much better. May God be the same to you. May God be the God of Abraham and Isaac, the God of Jacob and of Jesus, both now and forevermore. Amen.

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