

“God Provides for Abraham”

Sermon by Oby Ballinger

Edina Morningside Community Church; September 17, 2017

Genesis 21:1-3; 22:1-14

The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him....

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” 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.”

So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.” Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, “Father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham said, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So the two of them walked on together. 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.

But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He 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.” And 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. So Abraham called that place “The Lord will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.”

Thanks be to God?? We often end Scripture readings with, “The word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.” But “thanks be to God”, for this?? Today’s scripture challenges that verse of Second Timothy which claims, “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness....” (2 Tim 3:16). That said, I cannot recognize as *God* the voice at the start of this passage, who commands a father to kill his son in order to demonstrate ultimate devotion. Taking these verses on the level of fact would ask us to shelve a morality so fundamental that it shows up in the Big Ten: “You shall not murder.” We *must* question and challenge the divine command here, lest we encourage others to claim God-given license to commit murder. The God we know in Jesus Christ does not ask things like this, so we’re best to be on guard when the Bible starts to make it sound otherwise. Perhaps this story exists *not* for instruction, but “for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” Sometimes instead of a roadmap to follow, the Bible gives us a warning of where not to go.

We meet Abraham and Sarah about ten chapters earlier in Genesis, after stories about the tower of Babel, the great flood, and other examples of human inability to truly hear or follow God’s voice. God speaks to these nomads in the Babylonian land Ur of the Chaldeans, commanding Abram and Sarai to leave all they’ve ever known and go to a land that God would show them. The only guide they have in the journey is God’s promise of two things—land and children. They go throughout the region that we now call the Fertile Crescent until they arrive in Palestine. They grow prosperous in their decades of travel, and so can fill this rich, abundant countryside.

God's first promise of land has come true, but the second isn't even a twinkle in their eyes. God promised descendants as numerous as the stars in heaven or the grains of sand on the seashore, but Abram and Sarai are barren, and are now so old that having children is out of the question. God changes Abram's name to "Abraham", or "father of the nations", but he's ninety-nine years old, and it seems like mockery. When divine visitors come to tell the couple that old Sarah will have a baby next year, she laughs out loud. But when the baby arrives, that's what Sarah calls the child: Isaac, which means "laughter". This joyful, laughing child is the fulfilment of God's promise and a lifetime of prayer.

So what in the world comes over Abraham, that he decides to sacrifice Isaac? The text says that this is God's test, but I wonder what other voice or voices he might have heard. A voice that Abraham mistook for God because in old age his hearing wasn't so good? A macho inner voice that wants to demonstrate he's willing to do anything for God? A voice that fears the tenderness of love, that suspects he's not worthy to receive such joy? A voice that would protect itself by destroying the vulnerability that such tenderness represents? Abraham thinks he hears the voice of God, but these other voices seem more likely to me. Nevertheless, he follows this path and commits a terrible sin, for causing a child such terror in the moment of sacrifice (never mind the ram) is second only to the blasphemy of claiming that such murder is God's will. [In the words of another](#), "Abraham, the father of monotheism, is revealed as a man who can walk his own son to the altar and even wield the blade himself."

We don't sacrifice children these days to prove our faithfulness to God. But there are other ways that misdirected diligence and extreme obedience would seek to squash God-given life and potential. A free-spirited child is commanded to get his exuberant play under control. A person struggling with an eating disorder believes she's never good enough, and so tries to vanish from sight. A dutiful lawyer's 9-to-5 has become 7-to-7, and he sacrifices life with his family trying to get ahead. A religious dogmatist proclaims that only his way is right; but he's lost all sense of the Spirit's mystery. A hypervigilant adherent of political tribes enforces conformity to social norms rather than risking free thought. The culture of buy-more, rest-less keeps Americans so frenzied for the latest gizmos that we forget our own powers of creation and need for Sabbath. Inner voices tell us not to be ourselves, but to clip our wings and not fly high so as to fit in. Abrahams abound wherever expectations of conformity and performance are so extreme that laughter dies—that Isaac dies—and we become our own killjoys.

Thanks be to God for *this*, though. "Abraham, Abraham!" An angel of the Lord's voice pierces the old man's haze of deadly piety. "Do not harm the boy!" I believe *that's* where God first shows up in this story, when the angel speaks to stop the killing. God has no desire for joy to die—God brought the laughter into being in the first place! Sacrifices first began to establish loyalty and relationship with the divine, but sacrificial piety to the point of death brings no pleasure to God. Hence: "Abraham! Abraham! Do not harm the boy, your life, or the life of any other!" Do not harm, but do good instead.

Centuries after Abraham, the Hebrew prophets understood another meaning of sacrifice. Sacrifice is not killing something valuable, but taking on the hard work of righteousness. The prophet Hosea puts it this way: "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." Micah asks: "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come... with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? 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?" No! the prophet replies. "[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:6-8) *This* is what true faithfulness looks like—giving the best of oneself and one's life to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly. *This* is what our God requires of us, the sacrifice which leads to life rather than death.

For millennia, Jews, Christians and Muslims have lauded Abraham as a model of resolute, no-holds-barred faith. Despite my misgivings about this story, I do the same. Abraham is a flawed human being

who follows God long after most would have given up. He also has the good sense to recognize that what he *assumed* was God's will was not in *fact* God's will, and he shows an admirable ability to change his ways and follow God into better life. Yet he's not the only—or even the best—example of stalwart faith in the model of Micah. Alongside faithful Abraham, let's include others whose humble hard work for justice and kindness leads to life. Let's look to *them* for the sacrifices that please God rather than kill joy. To the child breaking a sandwich and giving half to a hungry classmate. To the person leading a community training and helping people engage their democracy. To the teacher preparing diligently for Sunday school, working hard to provoke discovery even when the class may be only two or three. To the idealist standing on the corner collecting signatures for this or that initiative. To the person living for decades in recovery to spare themselves and their loved ones the chaos of active alcoholism. To the elder whose prayerful support spills over into letters of encouragement and love. Each of these actions costs, and those who do them sacrifice something. Yet they come from a more generous and life-giving place than the close-fisted Abrahamic determination to obey no matter what, even at the cost of the self and the other.

So what makes for true joy in your life, and in the world? Where is Isaac, laughter, being born? Follow *that*, sacrifice to bring *that* into full blossom. *That's* what the Lord commands. Don't sacrifice laughter, but expand the things of justice and kindness that lead to greater, life-giving laughter. Thanks be to God for *that*. Thanks be to God, after all. Amen.