

“Thanks Be to God?”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Edina Morningside Community Church; September 19, 2021

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

YHWH was gracious to Sarah as it had been foretold, and did what had been promised. Sarah conceived and gave birth to a child for Abraham, who was now in old age, at the very time God had promised. They named the child Isaac...

After these events, God tested Abraham. “Abraham!” God called. “Here I am,” Abraham replied. “Take your son,” God said, “your only child Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, “Seeing.” Offer him there as a burnt offering, on a mountain I will point out to you.”

Rising early the next morning, Abraham saddled a donkey and took along two workers and his son Isaac. Abraham chopped wood for the burnt offering, and started on the journey to the place God showed them. On the third day, Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. Then Abraham said to the workers, “Stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will go over there; we will worship and come back to you.”

Abraham took wood for the burnt offering and gave it to Isaac to carry. In his own hands he carried the fire and the knife. Then the two of them went on alone.

Isaac said, “Father!” “Here I am, my child,” Abraham replied. “Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Abraham answered, “My child, God will provide the lamb for the burnt offering.”

Then the two of them went on together. When they arrived at the place God had pointed out, Abraham built an altar there, and arranged wood on it. Then he tied up his son Isaac and put him on the altar on top of the wood. Abraham stretched out his hand and seized the knife to kill the child.

But the angel of God called to him from heaven: “Abraham! Abraham!” “Here I am!” he replied. “Do not raise your hand against the boy!” the angel said. “Do not do the least thing to him. I know now how deeply you revere God, since you did not refuse me your son, your only child.”

Then looking up, Abraham saw a ram caught by its horns in a bush. He went and took the ram, and offered it up as a burn offering instead of his child. Abraham called the place “God Provides,” and so it is said to this day: “On this mountain YHWH provides.”

Thanks be to God?? We often end Scripture readings with, “Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church. 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). But I struggle to recognize as *God* the voice at the start of Genesis 22, 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 Ten Commandments: “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? 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. Causing a child terror as the moment of sacrifice approaches 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-9, and she sacrifices life with her loved ones 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 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 wonder if *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 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 front line workers risking their health in providing food, care, and healing to others. 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 a close-fisted 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, and what we seek as our purpose at Edina Morningside: "Sharing the joy of Christ's love by welcoming and serving". 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.