

“Abraham and Isaac”

Genesis 22:1-14

Rev. David K. Wood, Ph.D.

Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church

October 20, 2024

On the evening of January 6, 1990, Cristos Valenti--a middle aged bus driver living in California--took his youngest child, his most beloved daughter, with him in the truck, to faithfully accomplish what the voice of God had told him to: to sacrifice the one he loved more than anything in the world. They drove to a place he had been directed to and he told her that she soon would meet God. As they prayed “Our Father, who art in heaven” together, he reached for his knife and took her life. He sat next to her body and prayed for several minutes. When he looked up he saw her star shining brightly in the night sky; he saw two stars moving closer together. He knew then he had fulfilled her destiny, he knew he had done the right thing. He picked her up and took her home. When his oldest daughter opened the door, she saw her father holding the child like a *pieta*. “Call the police,” he said. “I have given her to God.”

Cristos never admitted to murder, even though he knew he had committed a legal wrong; otherwise, he would not have asked his oldest daughter to call the police. In court, he argued that to kill your own child does not mean that you are either evil or insane. He said: “How can you say no to God? Everything is his. We all belong to him. It was an order directly to me from God; God asked me for her. You can’t back out. I had no choice.” The jury sentenced him “not guilty by reason of insanity” and ordered psychiatric treatment. Almost everybody in the courtroom cried upon hearing this verdict. They felt betrayed on behalf of the murdered child and the mother who gave her birth and now lost her.

The story of Abraham and Isaac on Mt. Moriah is a tale of incalculable pathos and what makes this scene so emotionally-wrenching is that it involves one of the most morally reprehensible acts one can possibly conceive of- human sacrifice. It was a ritual which the Bible rigorously condemns yet it remained widespread throughout much of the ancient world. Thus, for God to demand of Abraham, his most loyal subject, that he take the life of “his SON, his ONLY son, the SON WHOM HE LOVES” as God tells him not only makes God look capricious, it ALSO makes God appear SADISTIC. The irony is that within this morning’s lesson, we find the very first occurrence of the word “love” in the entire Bible and it turns out to be in conjunction with Abraham being asked to sacrifice his only son.

Surprisingly, you have Abraham blindly complying with the command without offering the slightest objection to what God is asking. A few chapters earlier, he had argued vehemently with God to keep him from destroying the wicked city of Sodom, but now when it’s his OWN CHILD’S life that is at stake- “his SON, his ONLY son, the SON WHOM HE LOVES,” he doesn’t so much as register a MURMUR. He doesn’t try to REASON with God, reminding him that if Isaac dies, then God’s covenant promise to him--that he would become “the Father of Many Nations” with descendants as numerous as the grains of sand on the seashore--would become null and void. NOR does he protest on MORAL grounds, arguing that the taking of innocent life, ESPECIALLY of one so young, is not how a good and righteous God acts. Abraham simply COMPLIES with God’s demand with no questions asked.

I think what I find MOST problematic is how we REWARD Abraham for his single-minded devotion to duty, for his complete and unwavering obedience to God's command while we declare CRISTOS VALENTI INSANE and lock him up in a mental institution. How is Abraham's act ANY LESS insane when both men claim to have clearly heard the voice of God and both, out of love and devotion, demonstrate in the most RADICAL WAY POSSIBLE that God is their highest commitment, more so than to even their OWN CHILDREN. And although God prevented Abraham from slaying Isaac and in the latter case, God did not, there is every indication that Abraham WOULD have plunged that knife into his young son's heart had the angel of the Lord NOT intervened first. Yet, we esteem the one and demonize the other. Besides, who among us can argue with Valenti's reasoning when he said, "How can you say no to God? Everything is his. We all belong to him. It was an order directly to me from God; God asked me for her. You can't back out. I had no choice." Isn't that the same message I preach every fall at STEWARDSHIP TIME? Now can you understand my problem with this story and why for over half a century I STILL have some major reservations concerning it!

The great Danish philosopher/theologian Soren Kierkegaard struggled profoundly with this story, believing Abraham's decision was morally repugnant. In response, he wrote a whole book on it he entitled *Fear and Trembling*. In it, he creates an ALTERNATE scenario and imagines how Abraham and Isaac might have reacted in it. In HIS version, on the way up the mountain, Isaac soon realizes that HE and not a ram is to be the sacrifice and, in fear, he throws himself down at his father's feet and begins begging for his life. He reminds his father of the joy he has brought the family and all the sorrow and loneliness that existed in it before he was born. Abraham calmly walks with him and tries to comfort him, but Isaac is numb- he cannot hear a thing. Then for an instant, Abraham turns away and when Isaac sees him again, his face is changed- it is a look of wild horror. He seizes Isaac by the throat and throws him to the ground and says to him, "Stupid boy, do you suppose that I am your father? I am an idolater. Do you suppose that this is God's bidding? No, it is MY desire." Then Isaac trembles and cries out in terror, "O God in heaven, have compassion upon me. God of Abraham, have compassion upon me. If I have no father upon earth, YOU be my father!" But Abraham in a low voice says to himself, "O Lord in heaven, I thank you. After all, it is far better for him to believe that I am a monster, rather than that he should lose faith in YOU." In other words, Abraham would rather have Isaac believe that HE--his FATHER--is the fiend who demands his sacrifice rather than his FATHER IN HEAVEN so that he would continue to love and keep faith with God right up till the bitter end.

So then what DO we do with it? This account is presented as a test, not for the purpose of God learning something about Abraham but for Abraham to learn something about HIMSELF- that's generally what tests are devised for. When you look at the entirety of Abraham's life, it seems it was one continuous exam after another- some which he passes with flying colors while others he flunks quite spectacularly. God tested him when he commanded him to leave his homeland, tested him when Pharaoh wanted his wife, Sarah, for himself, and then tested him again when God was threatening to destroy Sodom. He was tested by having to wait so many years before the birth of his son Isaac and then tested one MORE time when he thrust Hagar and Ishmael--his first-born son--out of his house and into the wilderness as we say last week. Now he is given his ULTIMATE trial, his FINAL EXAM- to take the life of his "child of promise," to sacrifice "his SON, his ONLY son, the SON WHOM HE LOVES," and

that becomes a test that goes to the very heart of his relationship WITH God. It will demonstrate whether Abraham can COMPLETELY TRUST God or not.

You see, each step along the way of our journey with God is an education in faith. As St. Augustine once put it, there is no way to self-knowledge but through trial, through what he calls “some kind of experimental and not merely verbal self-interrogation.” Thus, we can discover truths about ourselves under the tutelage of God in the classroom of life which seminary instruction or the reading of books or mere introspection is NEVER capable of yielding. The fact is that life is a proving ground, a place for the testing and disciplining of one’s faith and powers, and WITHOUT being tried or proven, our faith can never deepen or mature. As it is written in the epistle of James, “Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” (James 1:2) But ALSO remember that God knows just how much you can bear and he will never give you more than you can handle. As St. Paul writes, “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.” (1 Cor. 10:13)

It has been said that in many a person’s life there will be at least one great love, one great sorrow, and one great trial, and for Abraham, that long, lonely walk up Mt. Moriah with his beloved son at his side was HIS great test. God had been training him from the beginning to live only by his promise. He called him out of his own land with the promise of yet another, much BETTER land. He promised him a son in whom all the families of the earth should be blessed, and though it took longer than anyone would have expected, God proved faithful to him ONCE AGAIN. His whole life rested upon that promise- it was EVERYTHING to him. And now he found himself confronted with whether he could trust God even when it was the PROMISE ITSELF that came into question. Could Abraham trust God to remain faithful to his word of promise even when the command to kill his beloved son Isaac, the very one through whom that promise would be mediated, would terminate that promise and cast into doubt the very nature of God’s own faithfulness and love? THIS was the nature of Abraham’s trial here in chapter 22.

I wonder how confident Abraham was when he responded to Isaac’s question as to the whereabouts of the sacrificial lamb with, “God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” I DO know there are times when despite how dire or overwhelming a situation may look, faith will rise up from some place deep within us to answer a situation in a way that seems to contradict all reason or common sense. Faith, according to the book of Hebrews, is “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Thus, faith speaks of complete trust in someone or something even when there seems very little reason to DO so. There is so much we CAN’T know or understand about our faith or our relationship with God and STILL, despite the many uncertainties and unanswered questions that plague us, we go on trusting and obeying ALL THE SAME because on some INTUITIVE level "we know that we know" there is something or someone who has claimed us for himself and will never let us go.

And so regardless of how appalling or irrational God’s command may appear- to sacrifice “his son, his ONLY son, the son whom he loves,” Abraham still believes that God “will provide himself the lamb,” even as he is about to raise the sharpened knife well above his head. As a result of his testing, he is rewarded for his faith with MORE blessings than he HAD BEFORE.

God tells Abraham: "By myself I have sworn, says the Lord, because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore. And your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves, because you have obeyed my voice."

For months now, I have been sharing with you how for the past year and a half, my dear friend Phil Moran has been slowly dying from ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's Disease. There is no cure as the body continues to break down while the brain remains unaffected- his mind eventually becoming a lonely prisoner trapped within it. He now finds himself in Hospice care as he's no longer able to talk or to walk or feed himself. For almost half a century now, there has been a close-knit group of us who have served as a Band of Brothers to each other and Phil is an essential member of that group. Everyone was planning on coming to Pittsburgh for a week along with their wives, and Phil was informing us why they wouldn't be able to make the trip back East. Several of us have already traveled to Boise, Idaho more than once this year to spend some time with him and his wife Charla, and I want to close by sharing with you an example of tremendous faith as evidenced through his own trial and testing in his emails to us...

*Brothers:*

*I have troubling news and I may not be able to join you in Pittsburgh. I have a neurological disease that has not been diagnosed yet. I have been seeing a neurologist and he is concerned that I have ALS. It started last fall with a change in my voice. A young doctor in our congregation noticed it and told me that I ought to see a neurologist. I put it off because it wasn't serious at that time. Last November I fell smack on my face in my office and had to get eight stitches in my forehead. I couldn't figure out why I didn't put my hands out to break my fall. Turns out it was a symptom.*

*Now I have great difficulty speaking and trouble swallowing. I frequently choke on my own saliva and food. I also have something called "pseudo bulbar palsy." When I laugh, I can't stop laughing. And I cry easily and can't stop crying. All these are symptoms of the beginning of ALS. I have not yet been diagnosed. I've learned that neurological disease is notoriously hard to diagnose. So it may be something else. Let's hope.*

*Phil*

*Brothers:*

*My neurologist (Dr. Ireland) referred me to another neurologist Dr. Wadhwa. I had an examination yesterday by Dr. Wadhwa and he does not think I have ALS, although that's still a possibility. I still do not have a diagnosis, but it was a relief to hear that he doesn't think it's ALS. My next appointment is in December. Apparently, symptoms have to worsen before I get a diagnosis. I've learned that neurological disease is notoriously hard to diagnose. Talking and swallowing have grown more difficult, as have balance issues. I can still walk and work outside, mow the lawn, work in my garden, etc. I can even go on a hike, but I have to use a walking stick. I can still drive.*

*I am sorry that I will not make it to Pittsburgh because I will be in therapy for speaking and swallowing. I will miss you guys and your wives. But I have to be in therapy because I have tremendous difficulty speaking and especially eating. I choke on my own saliva as well as my food. I have lost weight because of difficulty eating. Dr. Wadhwa says that therapy will help. Dave, I appreciate the note you sent about your church praying for me. I know that you guys are*

*praying for me and I'm encouraged by that. Like I said, I'm taking it a day at a time. "Sufficient for the day is its own trouble."*

*Phil*

*Brothers:*

*I have troubling news. I received a diagnosis on Thursday of Bulbar Onset ALS. As I assume you know, ALS is untreatable and progressive. BOALS is an aggressive form of ALS. It usually lasts 2 - 3 years, and it started about a year ago. I know that God has a purpose in this, to draw Charla and Tom and me closer to Him. I'm taking it one day at a time. Jesus said, "Sufficient for the day is its own trouble." I'm disappointed, but I am not afraid. I know that God loves me; and you guys!! The Lord will see me through this. After all, we're all mortal.*

*Phil*

I said last week that the lesson of the account concerning Hagar and Ishmael is that our God sees our struggles, hears our cries, feels our pain, and promises never to abandon us. Yes, God gave Abraham the promise that he would become the Father of Many Nations with descendants more numerous than the grains of sand upon a beach. But implicit within THIS promise is actually ANOTHER, MUCH GREATER promise without which the former could never have been made or even trusted. It is, as you have often heard me say, the promise that our God will always be there for us, that he not only stands BESIDE us but LIVES DEEP WITHIN us. As a result, regardless of whatever we experience in this life, amidst all its tragedies and all its triumphs, God will see to it that we receive all the strength and resources we will ever need to overcome them. We can and we WILL surmount every trial and misfortune REGARDLESS of how challenging they may be because of his unqualified commitment to us and of THAT we can be SURE! But remember this! God does not say he will magically deliver us from them but RATHER, he will reinforce us so that we are never completely overwhelmed by them. As a famous prayer goes, "Lord, I do not ask for you to remove the weight I find myself forced to carry. I only ask that you give me a stronger back with which to bear it!"

You probably heard that Ethel Kennedy passed away last week. In a recent copy of *The New Yorker Magazine*, there was a revealing essay on Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., her son who recently abandoned his quest for the Presidency. The article discussed the many trials and tragedies he's had to deal with throughout his life- from the assassination of his father more than a half century ago, to his various addictions, to the deaths of a brother and the suicide of his first wife. The article ended with the author asking him how the deaths of his loved ones had affected him personally and he responded by saying that after his brother David died, he turned to his mother for solace. He asked her, "Does the hole that they leave in you when they die, does it ever get any smaller?" Ethel replied, "It never gets any smaller, but our job is to grow ourselves bigger around the hole. In doing that, we make ourselves larger, and the hole becomes proportionately smaller."

She was inferring that life is an admixture of both the bitter and the sweet, but the secret of overcoming the BITTER times is by allowing God to refine us through them and not by thinking if we only pour enough drugs and alcohol and sex into them, we can then make those holes disappear. It is to allow God to make us and our faith bigger and stronger and more resilient so that rather than becoming BLACK HOLES which swallow up and destroy everything in their path, they present meaningful opportunities for us to grow and mature instead. And we CAN for we have Jesus Christ who promises us his total and unconditional commitment, who

through his Holy Spirit now makes our heart his personal and permanent home. Thus, he is always at our side and even WITHIN us, offering us his OWN strength to help us from one moment to the next. And not least, he affords us the love and support of his people, his Church in the world. Sure, the pain such holes create may never completely subside and yet through Christ and the resources he affords us, we find ourselves MORE than equipped to ENDURE and even OVERCOME them along with ANYTHING ELSE life may throw at us.

Friends, what we need MORE than understanding or insight is the ability to trust IN SPITE of the mystery and lack of answers. We need to hold fast to HIM who in the moment of our suffering and darkest nights holds fast to US with those invisible arms of his. We need to trust that those struggles and tests we face have PURPOSE in them- to increase our faith and confidence in God. And though the testings are hard and though at the time God's nearness and comfort may not seem evident, once the ordeal has passed, we are THEN able to look back and realize that the hand of God had ALWAYS been there- strengthening us and keeping us from falling. As Abraham saw that with each new trial, his capacity to trust God became greater, his faith became larger, and his confidence in God grew sturdier, so may WE have that SAME confidence when WE go through SIMILAR times of testing whether it involves the death of a loved one, a terrible illness, or a ruined relationship. Like Job, may OUR cry be "though he slay me, yet will I trust him" and again "when he has tested me, I shall come forth as gold." Let us pray...

*Heavenly Father, help us to see life as a great classroom with you as our teacher. And may we come to understand that every event we face in life—whether positive or negative—is actually a lesson to be learned in order to increase our faith and our confidence in you. May we never forget that we are your children whom you love with an everlasting love and that you will never allow us to experience more than we can handle. In Christ's name we pray. Amen and amen.*