

First Sunday in Lent

Text: Genesis 22:1-18 (NIV)

⁴On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. ⁵He said to his servants, “Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.” ⁶Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, ⁷Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, “Father?” “Yes, my son?” Abraham replied. “The fire and wood are here,” Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” ⁸Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them went on together. ⁹When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. ¹¹But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, “Abraham! Abraham!” “Here I am,” he replied. ¹²“Do not lay a hand on the boy,” he said. “Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.” ¹³Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, “On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided.” ¹⁵The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time ¹⁶and said, “I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, ¹⁸and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.”

Theme: He Has not Withheld His Son

This story is at the same time one of the most touching stories in the Bible and also one of the most gruesome. It is touching because we see the great love that there was between Abraham and Isaac. It is also a story that shows Abraham's great faith in God. On the other hand there is a gruesome aspect to it. God asked Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son. What is even harder to understand about this story is that child-sacrifice was the big reason why God's judgement came down on the Canaanites. Israel's conquest of the promised land was a gift to them, but it was judgement on the Canaanites. God commanded Israel to destroy the Canaanites, so that they wouldn't begin to practice child-sacrifice themselves. When they didn't destroy the Canaanites, they also ended up practicing it, and it became a reason why God sent His people into exile. (The whole issue of child sacrifice and how God hated that practice also says something to our acceptance of abortion and embryonic stem cell research today, but that is another topic.)

The Canaanites would sacrifice their children, hoping that they would receive some kind of great blessing for this great sacrifice. But that wasn't why Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son. It was because of his great faith in God. It didn't make sense, but because God said it, Abraham learned that it was the right thing to do.

In the end God stopped him at the crucial moment. He would not require the sacrifice of Abraham's son. But this episode in Abraham's life became a great description of God's love for us because he

would not withhold His Son, but gave Him up for our redemption.

I. Throughout this story Abraham showed a great faith in God.

You can see how the tension heightens already when God called Abraham. He said, *“Take your son, your only son, Isaac whom you love.”* Isaac was Abraham’s son, but now he was his only son because Abraham has sent Ishmael away. Most difficult of all, Isaac was a son that Abraham dearly loved. Then he was called to take his son to Moriah. This is the area which would eventually become Jerusalem. In that place he was called to sacrifice his beloved son. Then Abraham shows his faith in several ways. He left right away the next morning. He didn’t take any time to think about it. He didn’t try to change God’s mind. He set out to the place that God told him to go.

They traveled for three days, but Abraham still didn’t change his mind and turn back. Even when he saw the mountain in the distance, he still didn’t change his mind. It was then that he left his servants behind. He and his son then traveled alone. As they walked, Isaac asked the question that must have broken his heart. He noticed that there was fire and wood, but no lamb for the offering, “Where was the lamb?”

When they arrived, Abraham built an altar and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son and laid him on the altar. He went so far as to be ready to take the knife to slay his son, his only son, the son that he loved.

But what was the key to Abraham’s great faith? The key is in what he told his servants, *“We will come back to you.”* Abraham was not lying when he said this to his servants. He really did believe that he and Isaac would return. He saw no other possibility than that Isaac had to rise from the dead. Hebrews 11 tells us that this was exactly what Abraham thought when it says, *“Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.”* (Heb 11:19) If Isaac died, so would all of God’s promises to Abraham. God promised Abraham that it would be through Isaac that he would become a great nation. It was also through Isaac that all the nations of the world would be blessed. If Isaac died without a descendant, that would mean that Abraham’s Savior would never be born, and he would be lost. When Abraham set out for Moriah, when he walked along with Isaac, when he took the knife to slay his son, he was confident that God would raise his son from the dead.

But God told Abraham to stop. This was just a test of Abraham’s faith. Abraham showed his complete trust in God’s promises for him. In the end God didn’t require him to give up his son, his only son, the son whom he loved.

II. But God gave up his son, his only Son, the Son whom He loves for us.

There are many correlations between this story and Jesus. John 3:16 tells us that God so loved the world that He gave His only Son. In 1 John 4:9 John writes, *“This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”* God didn’t spare His own Son, but He gave Him up for us all. That is how great His love is for all of us.

In the story Abraham, Isaac, and the servants walked for three days. There is a correlation to the Lord's three year ministry. The Gospels show this time as a three year journey to the cross.

Then Isaac was given the wood to carry, as our Lord was given His own cross to carry. He went to innocently and willingly, just as Jesus did. Isaac was probably about 13 at this time. I would guess that if he want to, a 13 year old boy could overpower at 113 year old man, but he went as innocently and quietly as a sheep to its slaughter as Jesus went to the cross.

The place where Abraham built the altar is thought to be where Solomon built the temple, not very far from the place where Jesus would be crucified.

There are so many similarities until the moment of truth. The Angel of the Lord told Abraham to stop! A ram in the thicket would be offered in Isaac's place. The Angel of the Lord in the Old Testament is not any angel. He is always shown to be God, as when He appeared to Moses in the burning bush. He is the preincarnate Christ. The Angel of the Lord who stopped Abraham from sacrificing his son is the One who would offer His life on the cross as our substitute for the forgiveness of our sins. God would allow His own Son to be sacrificed in our place. He would bear all the sins of the world and die. God would lose His own Son, so that we could be saved.

But there is one more correlation. Just as Abraham knew that God could raise his son from the dead, God raised His Son on the third day. Abraham told the servants that he and his son would return. They did, just as he said. On Easter morning the women saw an angel at Christ's empty tomb, who told them, *"He is risen, just as He said!"*

III. We can have that same faith in God that Abraham had.

There are times when our faith is severely tested. We wonder how God could ever give us such a difficult cross to bear. But God has proven His love for us in the giving of His Son. In Him we have the forgiveness of sin. If God loved us so much that He gave His Son, His only Son, the Son whom He loves for sinners like us, we can be sure that He will give us all things. We can trust confidently in God's grace and mercy throughout our lives. We rejoice in His forgiveness, and we know that because Jesus came back from the dead, we too will rise to live eternally with Him in His glory.

It is amazing that Abraham had such faith in God, that He would not withhold His Son, His only Son, the Son whom He loved. We can have that same faith when we know and trust that God has not withheld His Son, His only Son, the Son whom He loves for our salvation. May God give us that faith in Christ, that we may be as confident of God's love as Abraham was. Amen

***Pastor Don Hougard
Benediction Lutheran Church
Milwaukee, WI
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