

THE ONLY SON

Genesis 22:1-18

First Sunday in Lent (Series B)

February 18, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The Old Testament lesson for the First Sunday in Lent comes from Genesis, chapter 22, verses 1 through 18. It is on page 14 of the pew Bible. The date is approximately 2000 bc. In this passage, God gives Abraham a test. But he doesn't use the test to learn something about Abraham. God already knows everything. He uses it to teach Abraham. Please stand as you are able for the Old Testament lesson. From Genesis 22, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

^{22:1} After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ² 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 of which I shall tell you." ³ So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. ⁴ On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. ⁵ Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you." ⁶ And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. ⁷ And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" ⁸ Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together.

⁹ When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ¹² He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." ¹³ And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴ So Abraham called the name of that place, "The LORD will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided."

¹⁵ And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven ¹⁶ and said, "By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, ¹⁸ and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice."

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Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

At first glance this seems like a sticky text. God commanded Abraham to kill his son. More specifically, God commanded Abraham to offer him as a burnt offering (22:2)—a sacrifice to God. This just sounds evil. And Abraham was actually willing to do it. This also sounds evil. There also seem to be a few smaller sins. There are a couple places where Abraham appears to have lied, first to his servants and then to his son Isaac. All of these apparent evils add up to make this seem like a sticky text. But it's really not that sticky. The problems are easily resolved, and then we will see that this text is one of the great treasures of the Old Testament.

Now, all of the Scriptures, of course, are God's Word and are profitable. But there are some that really stand out as remarkable, and this is one of them. The sacrifice of Isaac—or the near sacrifice of Isaac or whatever you want to call it—is like the filet mignon of the Old Testament. From the first bite to the last, it's delicious. It's a beautiful preview of God sacrificing his only Son for our redemption. So if we get to the end of this sermon and you don't see how awesome this text is, that could be your fault, or it could be mine, but it will not be the text's fault, because the text does not let us down.

But first let's deal with the difficulties and get those out of the way. The first difficulty is the fact that God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son. Child sacrifice is just plain wrong. God shows a special concern for children. During his earthly ministry Jesus demonstrated an uncommon concern for children (e.g., Luke 18:16). He loves them as his own. Our children really belong to God, and we are simply stewards entrusted with the privilege and responsibility of safeguarding them for the Lord. The murder or sacrifice of children is a special kind of evil. All sin—whether it seems great or small—damns us before God. But there's something especially sickening about the murder of children. So it seems wrong that God would command Abraham to sacrifice his son.

The lack of child sacrifice was one of the things that distinguished the worship of the true God from other ancient religions. Child sacrifice was a fairly common practice in ancient religions. But it has never been a part of the worship of the one true God. So it seems wrong that God would command Abraham to do it.

The solution to this difficulty is quite simple—so simple that we might just gloss over it. And it's simply this: God did not actually allow Abraham to kill his son. Isaac's life was never actually in danger. It was an unloaded gun. It was scary. If it were made into a movie, we would probably shield our eyes when Abraham raises the knife. But the all-powerful and all-knowing God was never going to allow the knife to fall. The actual sacrifice of a child was never God's intention, and it was never going to happen.

So then the bigger problem becomes Abraham's intention. Abraham did intend to lower the knife upon his son. And God wanted Abraham to have that intention. Now, if child sacrifice is a sin—and it definitely is—that would mean that God tempted Abraham to sin. That doesn't sound right, especially since we heard from James today that “[God] tempts no one” (James 1:13). But God let Abraham believe that he was taking his son from him. Or did he?

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When Abraham and Isaac leave the donkey and the two servants to go to the place of sacrifice, Abraham says, “Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you” (22:5). Abraham specifically stated that both of them would return. But Abraham also intended to plunge the knife into his son and then set fire to the altar. So did Abraham lie to his servants? I don’t think so. But we really don’t have to guess at what Abraham was thinking. *The Letter to the Hebrews* explains quite clearly what Abraham believed would happen. This passage from Hebrews is the divinely inspired commentary on the sacrifice of Isaac:

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. (Heb. 11:17-19)

According to Hebrews, Abraham knew that if it came to actually killing his son, God would raise him from the dead. Whatever happened on that mountain, Abraham believed Isaac would come back down alive. Abraham didn’t know exactly what would happen up there. Perhaps he suspected God would stop him from plunging the knife into his son. But even if God didn’t stop him—if it truly came to the point of Isaac’s blood being poured out—Abraham considered that God would then raise Isaac from the dead. If Abraham had been allowed to go through the whole process of slaying and burning his son, I suppose he would have just sat there, next to the ashes, waiting for God to put Isaac back together and raise him from the dead. Abraham was certain of this because he trusted the promises God had made to him. And, specifically, God had promised to make Abraham a great nation through his offspring Isaac.

Earlier in Abraham’s life, after God promised to make of him a great nation, but before Isaac was born, Abraham doubted God’s promise. He was childless, his wife was barren, and they were both getting pretty old, so he thought God must need a little help. So Abraham fathered an illegitimate child with his wife’s maidservant. But this was not God’s plan, so God told Abraham it would be through the child born to his wife Sarah, that the promise would be fulfilled.

And one year before Isaac was born, God visited Abraham, and he told him exactly what would happen: Sarah would have a son in her old age, they should name him Isaac, and it is through this son that God would establish his everlasting covenant. God even specified that Isaac would have offspring. (17:19) And within a year, the promise came to pass. Sarah conceived, bore a son, and they named him Isaac. Abraham was a hundred years old at this point, and Sarah was ninety. It was a true miracle, and it proved to Abraham that God would see to it that his promises are fulfilled.

So, some years later—when Isaac was still a child, but apparently strong enough to carry the firewood, and certainly before Isaac had any offspring of his own—God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. And by faith—that is, with trust in God’s promises—Abraham obeyed until the angel of the LORD stopped him (22:12). And the reason Abraham obeyed was because he trusted God’s promise. He was certain Isaac would live, because God’s promise specifically included Isaac having children, and God’s promise cannot be stopped.

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And this teaches us something about true faith. True faith—the only the kind of faith the Bible talks about—is always based on God’s promises. So if you have a vision like the one Abraham had, and God commands you to sacrifice one of your children, you should not do it. Why? Because God has not promised to bless the world through the offspring of your children. You would have no reason to believe that God would raise your child from the dead, at least, not until the resurrection of all the dead on the Last Day. Even if you happened to think that God would raise your child, just like he intervened and protected Isaac, you don’t have a specific promise to guarantee it, so that belief of yours would not be true faith. True faith is never based on our thoughts, wishes, or desires. But it is always and only based on God’s promises.

So let me give you a more realistic example, because God is never going to ask you to sacrifice a child. If you have a vision of that, it’s not from God. Do not obey it. But suppose you say something like, “I’m trusting God for good health in 2018.” Now that seems like a good thing, right? I sincerely hope that God gives us all good health in 2018. But he has not promised that specific thing, so it doesn’t matter, even a little bit, how confident you are that it will come to pass. True faith—biblical faith—faith in Jesus Christ—does not believe we will have good health in 2018. If it happens, it will be because God granted it, but we do not know today whether or not he will. What faith does believe, though, is that whether we have good health or bad, we have a gracious God who loves us and did not even withhold his own Son from us. And he will, for Jesus’ sake, grant us all good things, including the resurrection from the dead and perfect health in eternity. So we can’t say we are trusting God for good health in 2018. We can pray for it, but we can’t be sure we will receive it. What we can be sure of is that we will receive it in eternity, and that is infinitely better. So faith does not trust God for what we want. Faith trusts God for what he has promised. And it was by this kind of faith that Abraham offered Isaac.

So what was the point of this sacrifice, or near sacrifice of Isaac? It’s a picture of Jesus. It’s a picture of what God would do two thousand years later, when he sacrificed his own Son for the sins of the world. And this is the filet mignon part. This is the rich, juicy, and savory part of the text. You don’t need too much knowledge of the Christian story to notice the parallels between Isaac and Jesus.

First, Isaac is called Abraham’s “only son” (22:2). Even though Abraham did, technically, have another son, Isaac was the only son of the promise. And Jesus is the only Son of God.

You have Isaac carrying the wood for his own sacrifice up the mountain (22:6), just like Jesus carrying his cross to his sacrifice. You have the question Isaac asks his father, “Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” (22:7). And Abraham responds in faith, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering” (22:8). And you remember John the Baptist’s words concerning Jesus, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).

Then you have the sacrifice itself—that dreadful moment when Abraham raises the knife, and the text seems to go in slow motion, and we all want to cry out, “Don’t do it! Don’t do it!” And we breathe a sigh of relief when the angel of the LORD shows up and tells Abraham to stop. And it reminds us of that dreadful afternoon when the Son of God was lifted up on a cross. And darkness covered the mountain. And the biblical text drags on slower than ever. And at some point we expect ten thousand angels to come and deliver Jesus. Or we expect the heavens to

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open again and for God the Father to say, “This is my beloved Son. Leave him alone.” But he doesn’t. No angels. No intervention. No nothing. God the Father actually goes through with the sacrifice, and his Son a willing participant, being of one mind and will with his Father. And so we see God did not ask Abraham to do anything he himself wasn’t willing to do. And, in fact, God goes farther. He does the thing he did not require Abraham to do. The Son actually died.

And it kind of seems like that might be the end of the parallels between Isaac and Jesus, but it’s not. There’s at least one more. It’s the coming down from the mountain alive part. Even though Jesus’ story took him all the way into death—his blood was spilt; his heart stopped; his lungs quit; his brain shut down—on the third day he rose, just as he said (e.g., John 2:19), and he lives forevermore to grant eternal life to all who believe in him.

So this ancient story, from 2000 BC, stands as a sermon—a picture to us—of what God the Father would do in Jesus Christ. It’s a horrifying, but also beautiful, picture of God’s love in Christ Jesus.

And Abraham saw the significance too. In John 8, Jesus indicates that this was a prophetic foreshadowing for Abraham that allowed him to see what God’s only Son would do (John 8:56). Instead of seeing his only son, Isaac, dead that day, he saw another offspring of his, the Son of God, Jesus Christ, provided in Isaac’s place, and in the place of each of us. This whole thing was a picture for Abraham. It was a vision of where the promises God had made to him would lead. They would lead to God himself offering his Son for the sake of the world.

And the fact that God showed this to Abraham two thousand years before it came to pass is just marvelous, because it shows that way back in the Old Testament—even in the book of Genesis—God was working out this plan of how he would give his only Son for the life of the world. So when we look at the historical event of the cross, we are assured that it was no accident. It was no random event of history. It was God’s plan from the time of Abraham, and even from the foundation of the world. The whole scope of history centers around this one event of a Jewish man, who is also the Son of God, being sacrificed on a mountain outside of Jerusalem to pay for the sins of you and me and Abraham and Isaac and for the whole world. Jesus Christ is the only Son of God, appointed from before the foundation of the world to offer himself for the sin of the world. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.