

First Presbyterian Church
Greenfield, Indiana
Pastor John J. Paulson
June 26, 2011 2nd Sunday After Pentecost

Abraham, Isaac and God!

Genesis 22:1–14	Abraham's test is very hard!
Psalms 13	A prayer for God's help.
Matthew 10:40–42	Share what God provides!
Romans 6:12–23	The gift of God is eternal life!

Informally before the sermon: Do you remember taking your first driving test? I remember mine. It was a snowy day in Chicago and the streets were snow covered with ruts on the pavement. The License Branch tester had me parallel park the car next to the curb on a side street. Then he told me to pull out into traffic and turn right at the next corner. I was stuck, and couldn't get out of the parking place. Rocking back and forth did no good. We were stuck. After he told me that I had failed, he took over the wheel and couldn't get it out either. He finally had to call a tow truck to get us out. That was a hard test, but nowhere near as hard as the test that we heard about this morning that Abraham faced. That was a hard test!

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O LORD, our Rock and our Redeemer! Amen

This story is disturbing, to say the least. As we know, Abraham was one of God's special people, and his son Isaac was as well. Why would God put him through this?

First, let me give you a little background on Abraham. Called by God when he was already old, Abraham was obedient to God's every request. He moved his wife from their ancestral home to a new place, and God promised that he would be the father of a new nation and that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars and as plentiful as the grains of sand on the beach. He was married to a wonderful woman named Sarah. Full of the gift of hospitality, and a good cook, Sarah was quick to take in strangers and welcome them into her home. Sarah was obedient as well.

Abraham and Sarah embraced God's promises and waited patiently for the promised heir, but nothing happened. They remained childless well into Abraham's 70's, then through his 80's, and late into his 90's. They tried to take matters into their own hands and help God's plan along a bit, but all that did was get them into trouble between

themselves and with others. Abraham fathered a child with one of the servants, but that was not the way God wanted it to go.

One day God came to Abraham and Sarah and promised that in one year Sarah would have a child, and she did. God's promise came true and Isaac was born the next year, when they both were in the late 90's. Finally, a son. Someone they could love and nurture and teach about God. Someone who would carry on the bloodline of Abraham as well as being the conduit for introducing God's chosen people into the world and all those descendants God promised.

Little is known about the early life of Isaac. When did he start to walk? Was he an early talker? Did he play ball? Was he a quick learner? Did he ever communicate with God as his father Abraham did? We know he was a favorite of his mother and that caused conflict with the mother of Abraham's other son, Ishmael.

God had personally chosen Abraham to be the founder of his chosen people, a great nation that would carry God's name and policies into the world. Abraham knew God's grace in his life, and, he became a partner with God; he believed and trusted that he and God were mutually dependent on each other. Abraham could not succeed without God's help and, God could not succeed without Abraham's help. At least it seemed that way until the day God called him and told him to take his only son, Isaac, and sacrifice him as a burnt offering high on a nearby mountain.

When we read this story we are shocked! Although for us in the 21st century, the shock value may be lessened since we know how it came out. But for those first listeners, they must have been on the edges of their seats as they waited to see what was going to happen. In Abraham's day some of the various religions did practice human sacrifice.

But, there is still some shock value in this for us:

- First, we are shocked that God would ask Abraham to do such a thing. The God we know may ask us to sacrifice time to serve him. He may ask us to sacrifice our money to help him help others. But, the God we know would never ask us to sacrifice a human being for him.
- Secondly, we are shocked that Abraham, at least according to the story as we have it, didn't question God. We would have expected him to at least ask God why? But, according to the story, the morning after his conversation with

God, he gets up and takes Isaac and two servants, and sets off for the place God has told him about.

- Our third shock comes when, after Abraham has placed the wood for the burnt offering on the altar, he binds his son Isaac and places him on top of it. We have lots of questions that are not answered. Why didn't Isaac struggle and run away, or did he and the writer didn't tell us about it? Why didn't Abraham tell God that he wasn't about to actually sacrifice his son.

Maybe we have to look at who told us this story? Not the servants, they all stayed a distance away while Abraham and Isaac went up the mountain. If Moses wrote Genesis, as he is given credit for, he must have heard the story from someone who heard the story and so forth as it was passed down through the generations.

It would seem that either Abraham or Isaac must have been the original story-tellers, and both of them would have wanted the story to reflect positively on them and their relationship with God and each other. Abraham would have wanted to be seen as completely loyal to God, trusting God to the extreme, knowing all along that God would intervene at just the right time. Isaac would have wanted to be seen as an obedient child who trusted his father and God completely to do the right thing. Since he was saved, he could look back on this and conclude that God and Abraham knew all along how it would end.

All that is just conjecture. The text stands as it is written. God asked Abraham to do the unthinkable and stepped in at the very last instant to provide an animal for the sacrifice. That may be God's grace in action; it may also be where the saying comes from that goes "saved by the grace of God!"

In further stories about Abraham and Isaac, there does not seem to be any animosity between them. They appear to be part of a loving family, destined to get God's chosen people off to a strong start in the world. In Abraham's family, "Loyalty to God" is the family motto. Only later are we to see the descendants of Abraham, soon to be called the "chosen people" acting anything like the people that God had hoped for.

Abraham was trusting and obedient and certainly felt he was doing just what God wanted him to do as he led Isaac up the mountain carrying the wood for the sacrificial fire. Abram was trusting and obedient when he lifted up the knife.

How does this story make any sense to us in the twenty first century? What is the message in it for us this morning?

Is it the message that blind obedience to God is expected and demanded no matter what the consequences? Later on this summer we will hear the story of Abraham's grandson Jacob having a wrestling match with God. Jacob was rewarded with a blessing from God; from his case we may well learn that questioning God and conversing with God through prayer is acceptable as well.

Is the message that God will always step in and save us no matter what we are doing? We know that is not really the way God works in our lives. We have accidents and get hurt. We need surgery and treatment. God doesn't keep us from pain. God does promise to always be with us, to comfort us and have a place ready for us in his kingdom. God will not keep us from having problems, but God will always be there for us.

Is the message that like Isaac did, we should all do exactly what our parents or another adult tell us to do without question? Of course not. God gives us minds to think and the ability to look ahead and see the consequences of our actions. We certainly are not expected to blindly follow someone's instructions in every circumstance, particularly if they would lead to disaster or cause harm to ourselves or someone else.

Is the message that we must always forgive and forget as it seems that Isaac must have done with Abraham. The only time the Bible talks about forgiving and forgetting is when God tells us that our sins will not be remembered when we accept God's forgiveness. As human beings, we are supposed to forgive, but, it seems to me, it is just about impossible to forget; and we may not want to forget so that we can prevent whatever happened from happening again. No, the message is not to forgive and forget.

So, what is the message in this story?

For one thing, it tells us that the relationship between Abraham and God was very strong. Abraham is considered the founder of the three major religions in the world: Christianity, Judaism, and Muslim. As such, he is an important individual in the life of our church. When God called him, he answered and did as God requested. A model for us in our relationship with God. In exchange, God made him promises that have come true – he does have descendants that are as numerous as the stars in the sky. Unfortunately, they

do not all get along in our world today, but, that is the way it is in many families. In exchange for our loyalty, God gives us the promise of eternal life.

For another thing, it tells us that our ancestors were not perfect people. Today we would condemn Abraham, or anyone that claims that God is telling them to harm their child. We see Abraham at his worst in this story. Blindly, without question, he begins the journey that might well have ended in a terrible tragedy. Thanks to God, it didn't, but it paints Abraham in a bad light for what he almost did.

I'm not sure what it tells us about God. I have to admit that I really wrestle with this story every time I read it or hear it read. It makes me uncomfortable that my God would ever put anyone in the position of Isaac. It also makes me proud that God did come through in the end and save the boy.

This is a story about our ancestors and about God. A story that comes from a different time and a different culture. Abraham lived in a time when most people were worshipping so-called gods of their own creation. They didn't recognize the God that had called Abraham and made him those promises. In fact, most of them had not even heard about God. It is a story about a time when people were still learning how to relate to God and how God was learning to relate to his creation.

It is a story that we wish had never happened, but it did, so we have to deal with it.

It is also a story about the time before Jesus Christ. When Jesus became the ultimate sacrifice for all our sins, the need for any further sacrifice disappeared.

In our world today we know much more about God than Abraham did. We have seen God in action during the rest of the Old Testament and in the New. We have seen God have compassion time and time again; we have seen God give people second and third chances when they have disappointed or disobeyed him. We have seen God love us so much that he sent his only begotten Son into the world to bring the promise of eternal life to all those who believe in him.

Our God is complex, no question about that. Just when we think we have God figured out, something comes along and lets us see another dimension of God. When we put it all together as we read from cover to cover in this book, we find a loving, patient, caring God. A God full of grace who only wants the best for us and expects us to work along with him to bring the best to all of God's creation. AMEN