

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost/Proper 8 Year A  
June 28, 2020  
Genesis 22:1-14  
St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church  
Rev. Sarah Chancellor-Watson

“Sacrifice”

This week we are once again returning to the the Genesis narrative of God’s covenantal relationship with Abraham and his family. We shift our focus from Hagar and Ishmael back to the story of the main stage – Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac. If it’s been awhile since you’ve sat down and read all 10 chapters of this story in Genesis, let me refresh you. Abraham when we first meet him is Abram and he is married to a woman named Sarai, until God calls him and renames them, Abraham and Sarah. God calls Abraham and covenants with him to be his God and the God of his children. God will bless Abraham with land and descendants so great they will out number the grains of sand on the beach and the stars in the sky. Through Abraham and Sarah all the families of the earth will be blessed. Now, if you recall last week I mentioned that this story isn’t exactly the stuff of warm and cozy bedtime reading, and while I don’t have time to get into all the shenanigans that dear Father Abraham finds himself in the midst of in this narrative, what comes up again and again is how significantly Abraham’s obedience to God and his trust in God’s promises waxes and wanes. Despite God’s repeated assurances of God’s promises and signs of God’s faithfulness, Abraham and Sarah continue to complain, doubt, and question God – that is until they are the ones left laughing, holding their newborn son, Isaac.

Now this could be the end of the story – promises made and promises fulfilled. We could easily move on to Isaac marrying Rebekah, the births of Jacob and Esau, and then on to Jacob’s 12 sons who will become the 12 tribes of Israel, thus drawing a straight line from the promise of the covenant to the fulfillment of the covenant. But again we take another detour in the narrative in this morning’s scripture text, where it is not Abraham who now waivers in his faith, but God. God is the one who needs assurances and must put this test of faith to Abraham. Remember now that God has a lot riding on Abraham. It is through him that God has decided to move and work to bless all the families of the earth. God has come through on God’s promises, but can God be sure of Abraham’s fidelity now that the promise has reached fulfillment?

At first glance, this narrative is disturbing in many ways. First, it can seem to reinforce the image of a cold, judgmental, and unloving “Old Testament” God. But as we delve deeper, keeping in mind the bigger picture, we will find once again find the familiar, loving, faithful God that we know. What this story shows us is that God can still be sovereign, omnipotent, and wholly other and yet participate in our lives and in creation *and* still give us the freedom to act and decide our own actions. This is a powerful gift and one that is necessary for true and genuine relationship. Now, God may know the possibilities of our choices, but does not control our human actions and obedience. God has called Abraham for a mission, but Abraham’s participation is a choice. God always initiates the call, but Abraham (and we) can choose to take part in what God has already begun.

The second disturbing part of this story is the near child sacrifice of Isaac. I mean what kind of god would order the sacrifice of a child? Again, just a little bit of digging below the surface of this narrative reveals to us that God never intended to have Isaac killed and burned as part of the sacrifice. In fact, biblical scholars point to the many prohibitions against child sacrifice in the Law and some even think this story might have stood as polemic against the child sacrifice practices of the many ancient Canaanite religions. God’s command was not to kill the boy and it seems like the whole scene was set up from the beginning for the ram to take the Isaac’s place. Even here, God is the God of life, and even in this test, God comes through on God’s promises.

So why does God command such a sacrifice from Abraham as part of this test? Why involve Isaac? Because everything that Abraham has is wrapped up in Isaac. He is the culmination of all those years of yearning for a child and a legacy to leave after he is gone. What happens in this story is that what at first might be perceived as human sacrifice is really *a human’s sacrifice*. God is testing Abraham to know that when it comes down to it Abraham will trust in God’s promises once again, even to the point of surrendering that promise and allowing God to fulfill it in God’s own way and time. Ultimately, what God wants is not Isaac’s death, but Abraham’s heart and when Abraham surrenders his most precious gift by giving it back to the Lord, the Lord provides the necessary sacrifice.

The third part about this story that makes it so shocking, maybe a little disturbing is what it means for us. We often think about what can God do for us. And indeed this story provides

another stunning example of God's providence and care. But we don't often like to think about the demands that God places on our lives. This story has us asking the questions: What does God want from us? What is God challenging us to do? What sacrifices is God calling us to make?

Scripture shows us many times over that what God really wants from us is not a ritualistic sacrifice of flesh and bone or even perfect church attendance, but the sacrifice of our hearts, the sacrifice of self. In our gospel reading in Matthew, Jesus is preparing the disciples for their mission and the kind of life he is calling him to. I have to admit I've always been confused with this passage, where Jesus seems to advocate for violence and the fracture of relationships between even the closest of family bonds. But in truth Jesus is preparing his disciples for the kind of conflict this mission and ministry will inevitably bring them. He is preparing them for the same kind of test that Abraham endured, one that causes us evaluate all that we hold dear into alignment with our love for God and our devotion and obedience to Christ's call. As with Abraham, God wants to know that we understand that the divine gifts of grace, love, and forgiveness are given freely, we are not entitled to them, we do not earn them, and we do not truly possess them. God knows that it is all too easy for us to turn our wealth and possessions, our status and privilege, our work, our cultural identities and even our families into idols. What this story does is challenge us to give up what is most precious to us and to trust in God, trust that the Lord will provide.

God has called each of us to be a blessing to the world through our lives, to join in God's plans for creation; plans for justice, peace, and reconciliation, using all that we have been given. In order that we may fulfill that calling we must discern what it is that God is challenging us to sacrifice, – is it comfort and security, is it our carefully laid out plans, is it our privileged status in the world, is the need to be right or the need for revenge and punitive justice, is it power and influence, is it our fear, or are our excuses of being too busy, or feeling that we aren't enough getting in the way of our ability to live into the promised future that God has planned for us and for all of creation?

Through his covenant with God Abraham was left changed. When we reach this story in the narrative of Abraham's life, he passes the test of faith with flying colors because his relationship

with God has changed him. In our baptism, each of become likewise children of the covenant, an integral part of God's plans to change the world, starting with us and our hearts and into community around us. So what is it that you are called to place on the altar before God? Surrendering completely, trusting completely in the promises of God's plans for the future and in the assurances that the Lord will provide.