

WORLD'S WORST DAD: PART II

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Genesis 22:1-14

As I mentioned in my sermon last week, the story of Abraham and Isaac is my least favorite story of scripture. No matter how you couch it, for a parent to willingly offer their child as a sacrifice is bad enough. But when you realize they are doing it at the behest of their God, our God, it elevates this idea into something truly abhorrent.

As you know from the past couple of weeks of sermons, Abraham and Sarah were a couple who were called by God to follow God. The promise made was that if they were to obey God then they would have a nation of descendants and their names would become a blessing to all people. Despite their old age and lack of any children, they follow God to an unknown land which turned out to be the land of Canaan. They settled there and continued their lives. In time, after the announcement by three strangers who turned out to be angels of God, Sarah gave birth to a son and they named him Isaac. Abraham had already had a son by his servant Hagar, a child named Ishmael. But Sarah, in her jealousy, demanded that Abraham banish Hagar and Ishmael from their lives. Reluctantly, Abraham cast them out into the wilderness. But before they died of exposure, God intervened and saved them. And Ishmael grew to manhood.

Our reading for today is about the second son, Isaac. This is the son that God promised Abraham that through him Abraham's descendants would become a great nation. Isaac is the key to God's promise.

Our reading opens with the fact that God *tested* Abraham. And we need to keep this information in our heads—that God is testing this man.

God calls out to Abraham addressing him by name. Abraham responds to God. Our reading translates Abraham's response as, *Here I am*, which is not incorrect. If I'm at home and my wife calls out my name, she wants to know where I am, and I may answer, "Here I am." But in the Hebrew, what Abraham says has more of an immediacy to it. To get a better feel for what is going on, we might want to use the word, "Ready." In other words, God calls to Abraham, and he responds with, "Ready." Abraham is engaged.

God then says to Abraham, *Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I will show you.* And this is half of what I find abhorrent about this story, that God would even ask such a thing.

The other half that I find abhorrent is that Abraham obeys. He does what God asks.

As a pastor, there was a time when I was younger that I recognized that call into ministry. That meant a radical change of my life. It meant leaving my home and going to a special school. After that, it meant that would go to serve in a church. Likely, this wouldn't be in place of my choosing, but rather one to which I had been called, one that I felt that God was sending me. And I was okay with this. I answered the call. I obeyed the sending. I came to Tennessee. I'm very happy that I have followed my calling. But if God were to call me and instruct me to take my daughter, my only child, the one whom I love dearly, and offer her as a burnt offering—to murder her—I'd probably say no. That's a line that I that I could not cross.

But Abraham obeys. And we read that early one morning, Abraham rises and saddles his donkey. And then he calls two of his young servants to go with him and he collects Isaac, and he cuts some wood for the fire for the burnt offering, and he sets out heading to the place that God had directed him.

This is where the story slows down. Every excruciating detail is laid out for us here. As I read this story, I feel like I'm walking through molasses. Every moment is awash with the dread that hangs over these events. We know what is going to happen—the sacrifice of the boy.

This little quartet of travelers walks for three days until Abraham sees the mountain far away. He tells his two servant boys to stay put with the donkey. He tells them that he and Isaac will continue to the mountain where they will worship and then return. He is lying, because he knows that Isaac will not be coming back.

Abraham then takes the firewood and straps it on Isaac's back while Abraham carried the embers to start a fire and the knife for the slaughter. They walk on toward their goal.

This is the sort of road trip where a father and son can bond. They can talk. The father can ask the boy about his plans for the future. But there will be none of that here because Abraham knows what we all dread—that the boy is going to die. he has not future.

At one point Isaac calls out to his father, who replies with the same response that he gave to God, by saying, *Ready*. Isaac wants to know why they didn't bring a lamb for their sacrifice. Abraham tells him that *God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering*. And they continue walking.

When they arrive at their destination, Abraham constructs an altar and lays the wood on it. He binds up his son and places him on the altar on top of the wood. Of course, at this point we should be concerned with the terror must be racing

through Isaac's heart. Isaac understands that a death is required for this sacrifice. He has already asked about the lamb. But now he must realize that he is the one being sacrificed. And he watches in disbelief as his father raises the sacrificial knife and prepares to slit his throat.

Even though you know how this story ends, you are still sitting there anxiously holding your breath waiting for the knife to fall. But thankfully, it doesn't. Abraham is interrupted by an angel of the Lord who calls Abraham's name. Abraham responds again with, *Ready*, because he is more ready than ever to hear the voice of the Lord. God tells Abraham to stop. *God says, Don't hurt the boy*, for now God knows how absolutely Abraham fears God. God knows this because Abraham did not withhold his only son from the Lord.

Then Abraham looks up and spots a ram caught in the bushes by its horns. Whether the ram had been delivered by the angel or if Abraham has been so focused on his task that he had not seen it does not matter. The ram is there, and Abraham takes it and uses it for the burnt offering. A life has been given; a life has been saved.

This story is a foundational story for both Christians and Jews. Christians know it as "The Sacrifice of Isaac" (although Isaac is not actually sacrificed. The Jews call this "The Binding of Isaac," because of the Hebrew word *akedah* from the sentence *He bound his son Isaac.*"

For Christians, this story is central in foreshadowing Jesus' crucifixion. The New Testament's Letter to the Hebrews makes this comment about the story, *By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac... He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back* (Hebrews 11:17-19). In the fifth century, Saint Augustine wrote, "Just as the Lord carried his cross, so Isaac himself carried to the place of sacrifice the wood on which he too was to be placed."¹

As a Christian, it is easy to look at this story and see the reflections of Jesus' own sacrifice. In fact, we see the blueprints of the God's great plan of salvation that started with Abraham and culminates with Christ.

But when I read this story, I focus on what we saw at the very beginning—that God was testing Abraham. I mentioned about how I found this abhorrent that God would do this. But God needed to know. So much was riding on Abraham, and God needed to know if he was a person who had faith—not a shallow, convenient faith, but an unwavering, obedient faith. God put Abraham to the test as a test of his faith. And Abraham complied. It looks like he complied out of blind faith. But that was not it. We find out at the end why he did what he did. He trusted that "The

¹ Sait Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson, Penguin Classics (London/New York: Penguin, 2003), 694.

Lord will provide.” He didn’t know how; he didn’t know when; but he took each dreaded step from his home to that mountain with the faith that God would provide. He didn’t waver; he didn’t doubt. He trusted.

And we worry that we couldn’t do what Abraham did. But we don’t have to. God interrupted Abraham from sacrificing Isaac, but God also allowed his own, only son—his beloved son—to die. But God will provide and Jesus did not stay dead. He overcame the powers of sin and death proving once and for that God is with us. We need never question God’s actions or intentions. We need only have faith.