

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, Fourth Sunday After Pentecost, July 2, 2017

Are You Loved By God?

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July 2, 2017

Genesis 22:1-14

Today's scripture reading from Genesis is one I dread each time that I have to prepare a sermon based upon it. I just can't imagine the emotional trauma that I would have gone through if God had asked me to sacrifice one of our children to him.

A couple of weeks ago I used the sermon title, "You Must Be Kidding" while discussing God telling Abraham that he and Sarah would have a son even though they were quite elderly. If God told me that I had to sacrifice a child, I probably would have thought that it was a joke. I might say, "You must be kidding Lord." Surely Abraham thought this way when God told him to sacrifice his only son. How could our God of love ever do such a thing?

The whole idea is so abhorrent that some preachers never preach on this text at all. How do you address such a topic? The answer is, "With great difficulty."

I have recordings of sermons given over the years including every sermon given by one pastor for the past seven years. Even though today's scripture appears in the recommended scripture readings on a three year cycle, I could not find a single sermon which used it.

I mentioned to our daughter Karen that I was writing this message. She is on the staff of a large Presbyterian church in Arizona and was appalled. She said that if God told her to sacrifice her son, she would rebel at God. I don't wonder. Most people would rebel, but that was not the case back in Biblical times, not at all.

Child sacrifice was not uncommon for some groups back then but it became abhorrent to Israelites, perhaps in part due to what Abraham went through in today's scripture reading. But, even so, here we have God telling Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, and Abraham obeyed just as he had obeyed when God told him to leave his home in Harran and take his wife and nephew Lot to live in the distant land of Canaan. Abraham listened to God, did what God told him to do, and was faithful to God.

Surely, this time, Abraham would rebel. But he didn't. He rose early in the

morning, took his son Isaac and two servants with him and headed for Moriah as God had instructed. All he told Isaac was that they were going to make a sacrifice to God.

Isaac helped to gather and carry the wood for the burnt offering. When they came near the place for the offering, Abraham told the servants to stop and wait while he and Isaac went on ahead.

Not realizing what was going on, Isaac carried the wood for the sacrificial fire, much as Jesus carried his cross.

God eventually sacrificed his own Son and was telling Abraham to do the same.

Abraham had been promised that he would father a great nation. He had two sons, Isaac by Sarah and Ishmael by Hagar but Ishmael and Hagar had been sent away. Only Isaac remained and now he was to be sacrificed. How could God ever keep his promise to Abraham if Abraham's only remaining son was to be sacrificed? **How indeed!**

A father slaying his son! Can you imagine anything more horrifying? It was not uncommon in pagan societies but this wasn't a pagan society. This was with a follower of Yahweh, God!

Isaac asks where the animal for the sacrifice was and Abraham tells him, "*God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.*"

But, when they reached the place for the sacrifice, Abraham built an altar, laid the wood on it, tied Isaac with ropes, and laid him on the altar for the sacrifice. He took out his knife to slay his son but God interrupted calling out, "*Abraham! Abraham!*"

He answered "Here I am" and God stopped the sacrifice of Isaac, providing a ram to be sacrificed instead of Isaac.

Why did God do this in the first place? Clearly it was a test of Abraham's loyalty, but **what a test!**

God reassured Abraham that he will keep his promises to him and says, "*I swear by myself ... that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore ... through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed because you have obeyed me.*"

Jacqueline J. Lewis, ⁽¹⁾ in commenting on this story said, "*There are many*

theories attempting to explain this disturbing passage [of scripture] ... We will never fully understand, but there is value in considering and questioning."

What does it mean to follow God without a question? Can we question God's intent with our own sense of ethics and morality?

"Abraham obeys God because Abraham trusts God. In the trusting relationship, there is testing, perhaps mutual testing ... Perhaps it is in the testing that God creates a people, a partnership people with whom to be in the universe."

As Walter Bruggemann, et al ⁽²⁾ puts it; Abraham's response permits the journey of faith that began in Genesis to continue.

"Abraham bound his son and laid him on an altar, but then God provided an alternate sacrifice. Hundreds of years later, God would provide another sacrifice --- His own Son. Think of how agonizing it must have been for God to sacrifice His Son, His only Son whom he loved! He went through that because He loves you." ⁽²⁾ He loves all of us.

If you have ever wondered if you are loved by God, wonder no more.

Alleluia! Amen.

1. Jacqueline J. Lewis in A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 2016
2. William Bruggemann, et al, Texts for Preaching --- Year A, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 1995
3. Our Daily Bread, June 8, 2015

NOTE: Scripture quotes are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011