

**SERMON: “The Deep, Deep Love of Jesus” Part 1
“The God Who Provides Himself”**

March 8, 2009

PRAYER: Almighty God, whose holy love demands all and provides all, open now our hearts to the reading and preaching of your Word, that by your Spirit we may hear your call to faith in all of its shattering power and be empowered to respond with all that we that have and all that we are; through Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Amen.

This morning we begin our lenten journey to the very heart of the Christian faith—the death and resurrection of the beloved Son Jesus. But as John Rogers and Dick Ray are helping us realize in our Endowed Teacher series, we cannot understand who Jesus is and what he does apart from the witness of the Old Testament as well as the New. During this lenten series of sermons on the “deep, deep love of Jesus,” our task will be to seek to understand more fully the depths of God’s holy love as it finds expression in some of the most profound texts of the Old Testament.

Old Testament Lesson: Genesis 22:1-19

New Testament Lesson: Hebrews 11:17-19

It is an awesome, deeply disturbing story that we have read this morning from the book of Genesis. In Jewish tradition the story is so important that it has a name. It is known as the *Akedah*, “the binding of Isaac.” Some of you may be hearing it for the first time. Others of you may have heard it a number of times before. And every Sunday, whether you notice it or not, the first of our stained glass windows that depict the biblical drama of salvation reminds us of this profound and poignant story whose meaning we can never exhaust.

The story itself is told with consummate artistry. Every detail is carefully chosen—not a word is wasted. The Jewish writer Elie Wiesel says of the story that the imagery is so striking, the language so austere, “the dialogue so incisive, that it leaves one with a knot in one’s throat.”ⁱ There is no more poignant scene in all the Old Testament than this, as Abraham and his beloved son, Isaac, journey together in silence to the appointed place of sacrifice, “encircled,” says Weisel, “by God’s unfathomable design.”ⁱⁱ

To catch the full impact of the story, remember **who Isaac is**. Isaac is the beloved son born to Abraham and Sarah when both were long-past their child-bearing years. Isaac's very existence was a miraculous gift of God. God had promised to make of Abraham a great nation, but Sarah was barren and Abraham himself, as the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, “was as good as dead.” We all know what that means.

So when the news came that Sarah would celebrate her 91st birthday in the maternity ward, she laughed at the absurdity of such a thing--just as earlier Abraham himself had laughed in the face of God. The whole idea was preposterous. It was beyond all human possibility. Nine months later when the son of impossible promise was born they named him Isaac, Yezhak, which in Hebrew means “Laughter.”

But Isaac was more than just a beloved son, more than just a “miracle child.” His very life was rooted in the promise of God. Every time Sarah held little Laughter in her arms, she knew that God was faithful to his promises. Blessed be the name of the Lord!

Isaac was the link by which the promise of God to make of Abraham a great nation would be fulfilled. On him rested not only Abraham's love and fatherly affection, but all of his hopes and his faith, as well. It was through Isaac that the promise of God to bless all the families of the earth through Abraham would go forward.

That is why we are so stunned to read those chilling words, “**Abraham, 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...**” a holocaust. The words are almost too terrible to speak or hear this side of the sacrifice of six million “Isaacs” in the ovens of Auschwitz and Buchenwald. But as harsh and cruel as the words may sound to us, think how much more so they must have sounded to Abraham himself.

The narrator does nothing to lessen the pathos of the situation. Over and over we are reminded of Abraham's deep love for his son, his favored one, whom he loved so much. Everything--literally everything--that Abraham held dear was focused in Isaac. Without Isaac he had no hope, no future, no promise, no blessing. If Isaac were to be sacrificed, the long journey of faith that began back in Ur of the Chaldees would come to a dead end, and the promise of God would prove as empty as old Sarah's womb. Then Abraham would indeed be "as good as dead."

And yet--when the terrible command comes, Abraham obeys--with no word of protest, no debating the matter, no attempt to let Sarah, or Isaac, talk him out of it. Abraham does not bargain with God for the life of his son as earlier he had for Lot and the inhabitants of the wicked city of Sodom. No sooner has Abraham been told to sacrifice his beloved Son, this laughing gift of Promise, than bright and early the next morning he is out cutting word for the sacrifice.

How could such a thing be possible? Every shred of sensitivity within us wants to cry out, "For God's sake, Abraham, don't do it! Be sensible! What kind of a god would command the sacrifice of a child? Surely there must be some mistake. What makes you so sure that it was the LORD who commanded such a monstrous deed? Would the God who gives life, command death? Would a good and loving God demand the sacrifice of your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, promised son of Laughter?"

But as heart-felt as our questions may be, they are never addressed in the story. From the beginning the narrator makes clear that it is Abraham who is being tested, not God. We often take the opposite tack. We tend to assume that there are limits beyond which even the Almighty dare not ask our obedience. But the Bible makes no such assumption. Scripture

insists that God is free to demand of us whatever God wills. It is not for us to call the Creator of the heavens and the earth before the bar of our justice. We can set no limits on what the sovereign Lord of life and death may demand of us. The story tests our faith almost as much as Abraham's. That in large measure is what is so disturbing about it.

From the beginning of the story we know something that Abraham and Isaac do not know. We are told it at the beginning. **“After these things God tested Abraham.”** There is something God must know about Abraham and something Abraham must know about God, as well. Will Abraham trust God to provide for the fulfillment of all of God's promises—and will God prove trustworthy in providing a way for his promises to be fulfilled?

Abraham, who once had been called to “go from his country and kindred, and father's house” to the land God would show him, is now called to “go to the land of Moriah” and offer his son as a burnt offering on the mountain God would show him. Surely the command to sacrifice the beloved son Isaac must have cut across every fiber of Abraham's being like a knife on a nerve edge. Abraham is called to the most radical trust imaginable. That is why throughout scripture Abraham is the model of faith. At the deepest lever of his being Abraham is called to trust that **GOD WILL PROVIDE**. God will provide a way for his promises to find fulfillment, even when the way seems utterly impossible, beyond all hope, even laughable.

In one of the most poignant scenes in all literature we see Abraham and Isaac walking side by side to the place of sacrifice. Abraham carries the fire and the knife. Isaac carries the wood. As they journey together, Isaac says to his father, **“The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”** Does Isaac have any inkling of what lies ahead? Abraham replies, **“God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt**

offering, my son.” Then the two of them walk on together in silence, bound in the trust that somehow, someday, God will provide himself all that he commands.

In the awesome story of the “binding of Isaac,” the Genesis storyteller insists that the promises of God are not dependent on any visible, tangible sign--on what we sometimes call “God's blessings.” God’s promises rest on God's own sovereign freedom to be with and for us and on God's covenant faithfulness to that which he has promised. On that and that alone!

It is easy for us to be so horrified by the command to sacrifice the beloved son Isaac, that we miss the deeper issue at stake here. If Isaac is sacrificed, is it all over? Have the promises of God proved empty—have they come to an end for all time? Or can the God who formed life in the barren womb of Sarah form life again? Can God provide a way into the future God has promised? That is a question that echoes throughout the whole biblical drama of salvation.

The clear witness of scripture from beginning to end is that God is not bound by our little boundaries of the possible. God is able to call forth life out of all our human barrenness--even out of death itself. At every dead-end in the story of God and his covenant people we see God providing a way into the future where to human eyes none seemed remotely possible.

All this to an end in the cross of Christ. If the beloved Son is sacrificed on the cross, and laid in a tomb sealed with a stone no man can move, is it all over? Has God proved faithless to his promises? Or cannot the Lord of life shatter the bonds of the grave and bring life out of death and hope out of despair?

And what about our own lives? If our lives fall apart--and God seems to wear the face of a Stranger, so that with St. Teresa we, too, cry out, "O God, if this is how you treat your friends, it's no wonder you have so few of them," still cannot the Lord who called us into being, and set his love indelibly upon us, and sealed us in the waters of Baptism with the promise of his Spirit, cannot God make good his promise to see us through, come what may?

The ringing affirmation of the story of the binding of Isaac is that **God will provide**. God will provide a way for his promises to be fulfilled and for his purposes to be accomplished. Of that we can be sure, and on that we can rely, in life and death.

But to accomplish his purposes God may have to use some strange ways and some strange people, as the Bible makes clear time and time again. God may have to raise up children of Abraham from the stones of the street, or anoint as "messiah", for a time, one like the pagan conqueror Cyrus, who did not know or worship God. God may have to loose the whirlwind of his justice, and let us reap the harvest of our pride and greed, until we come to our senses and realize that life always has moral consequences.

Or God may have to stand with tears in his eyes and his hands clinched tightly behind his back as the shadow of a cross falls across the window sill of heaven, whispering, like David, "My Son, my Son, would ... that I had died for you." Or God may even have to raise the dead, and create a new heaven and a new earth, and wipe away every tear from our eyes, and destroy death forever, as God fulfills his gracious promise to be with and for us eternally. In the sovereign freedom and gracious faithfulness of God, God will provide a way for all his purposes of love to go forward. That we can trust with all our being!

When all is said and done, our faith rests in God and in God alone, not in any sign of God's goodness, not in any tangible blessing we may have and hold, not even in Isaac, the promised son of laughter. Even when God seems far off and silent, even when the earth shakes beneath our feet, and the darkness is so thick you can taste it, it is our deepest faith that from God's love in Jesus Christ nothing in life or death can ever separate us. That is the gospel in a nut shell.

So the awesome story of the binding of Isaac drives us as Christians beyond the B.C. world in which father and son journeyed in silence to the place of sacrifice. It drives us on to the deeper story of another Son, deeply beloved by the Father, who in time was also laid on the wood, which he himself carried. The story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac points forward to the full sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Once at family devotions Martin Luther read the story of the sacrifice of Isaac. When he had finished, his wife Katie objected, "I do not believe it. God would not have treated his son like that." Oh, but Katie," said Luther, "he did. He did!"ⁱⁱⁱ

This is not the last we will hear in scripture of Mt. Moriah, the place where Isaac was bound for sacrifice. Later we are told that the hill on which King Solomon built the temple of the Lord was once called Moriah. And a still later tradition would identify Moriah with a hill outside Jerusalem known to us as Golgotha.

That may not be true geographically. But it is profoundly true theologically. It is on the cross that we see that God does provide the perfect sacrifice... **himself**. Abraham says to Isaac, **"God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son."** And that he did and he does. Centuries later John the Baptist would say of another beloved Son, **"Behold, the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."** In the death and resurrection of the beloved Son Jesus, God does provide for the salvation of the whole world, for all who

share the faith of Abraham--the faith that trusts God to provide for the accomplishment of all of God's purposes of redeeming love.

But can we really believe all this? How do we know that we can really trust that God will provide, especially when it seems that God's promises have come to a dead-end? How do we know? **We know only by faith in the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead.**

It is with profound insight that the author of the Letter to the Hebrews links the sacrifice of the beloved son Isaac with the resurrection of the beloved Son Jesus. In the binding of Isaac we see a foreshadowing of a resurrection yet to come. We are told that **“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...”** (Heb. 11:17,19)

You see, the basic theme that runs throughout scripture is that of the **resurrection**. Can God indeed bring life out of death? Can God provide for the accomplishment of all God's purposes, no matter what? Can God “make a way out of no way?” Long before the decisive resurrection of Jesus, there are thousands of little resurrections throughout scripture, as God keeps on opening a way into the future God has promised. Biblical faith and hope rest on the assurance that God will indeed provide a way out of death into life, life eternal in God's new creation. On that we can bet our very lives, for time and eternity. “We say, ‘In the midst of life we die,’ wrote Luther. God answer, “Nay, in the midst of death we **live.**”

And so, in whatever faith in the faithfulness of God we can muster and that God can call forth within us, we, too, can journey on, surrounded and sustained by that “great cloud of witnesses,” who have learned in their own times of testing that in all things we can trust the gracious providence of the God of Abraham and Isaac and Sarah, the God and Father of

our Lord Jesus Christ, "the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." To him be all glory and majesty, all dominion and power, now and ever more. Amen.

Notes:

i. Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends*, Summit Books, NY, 1976, p. 80.

ii. Wiesel, p. 81.

iii. Told in Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, Mentor Book, 1950, p. 290.