

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“Father and Son”

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The Sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22:1-18)

This text rolls around every three years. Usually, I avoid it. It's a terrifying text. But it's also a holy story, a part of God's Word; and it's an intriguing story too, is it not?

What's really going on here? Does God really want that father to kill his own son? And what kind of son, big and strong enough to carry wood up a mountain, would not at least try to escape from a man who is over a hundred years of age? And why would God put them through this in the first place? What was He up to? It must be important to justify the anguish.

It helps to recall the context. This is all happening way back on the front edge of recorded history. This is long before Moses and the 10 commandments. God is just beginning to reveal himself and his will. He comes to Abraham and Sarah and promises He's going to make a great nation of their descendants. Through their descendants, God is going to show the rest of the world who He is, and what He expects *from* all, and what He will do *for* all.

There's a problem though. Abraham and Sarah are childless, and well beyond the years of childbearing, so the very idea of having children now is preposterous. "Impossible" they think. Sarah laughs at the thought of it. But nothing is impossible for God, and finally, 25 years later Isaac is born, the first descendant of this great nation. Isaac grows. He inherits the promise, the blessing, the responsibility. The great nation will descend from him.

But then one day Abraham hears the voice of God, and what God says is stunning and terrible. "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. . . So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, took two servants and Isaac, and some wood and a fire pot and set out." For three days they travel – Father with tortured heart along with the son he loves. Abraham has three days to reconsider; three days to change his mind, three days to mull over how this new command contradicts God's earlier promise to give countless descendants through Isaac. On the third day they arrive at Moriah. Abraham and Isaac proceed up the mountain alone and Isaac asks the obvious: "Father, where is the lamb?" Abraham's answer is both evasive and full of faith. "God will provide for Himself the lamb for the offering, my son" he says.

That's good enough for Isaac. He trusts his father. Abraham trusts the Lord, and the terrible drama continues right up to the last terrifying moment. Abraham has bound Isaac and laid him on the wood. He has knife in hand and is about to go through with it when the angel of the LORD stops the whole proceeding just in the nick of time. Abraham has proven his faith. There's a ram trapped in the thicket. Isaac is unbound, a sacrifice is made, and they go home.

I've always wondered what they talked about as they walked home. Did Abraham ever tell Sarah what he almost did to her only child, her laughter?

It's a difficult story. We do well to remember that it is a very old story. At the time, human sacrifices were common among the Canaanites. So one of the first things God is teaching Abraham and us is that there will be none of that happening among His people. "Do not lay a hand on the lad" is another way of saying, "Thou shalt not murder", one of the commandments God would later give to the Israelites.

On the basis of this story, and the anguish it must have caused, sophisticated people love to set themselves up in judgment over God. We can be so smug and condemning and hypocritical. In our own culture we allow children to be sacrificed every day, not to appease the gods as the Canaanites tried to do, but so our own priorities and values are not shuffled by an unplanned pregnancy. Again, we should think twice before condemning Abraham or God, lest we find those heat seeking missiles coming right back at us!

What else does this text teach us? We learn that life with God, the true God, is not always so easy or predictable. God can become very demanding of us, calling for something very deep out of our souls. He doesn't need or want our lip service. He wants our hearts. He wants to see some willingness to trust and believe; some willingness to give and sacrifice and live for something more than our own selfish pursuits. The true God does not always submit to being managed or manipulated. Abraham learned that God makes promises that don't always seem possible. He gives orders that don't always make sense. This is the living God; a God whose thoughts and ways are far more mysterious than the idols we carve for ourselves. Our God is by no means tame or safe, but He is good and merciful.

Moreover, that which you are not willing to give up is your god. Thankfully, God doesn't often ask us to give up our children, but he might, to accident or disease. He might ask you to give up your reputation at work because you are a serious Christian. Your freedom down the road, because of Christian persecution, or your money. That which you would never give up, is your god. The true God said to Abraham, "Do not lay your hand on the boy . . . for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."

Finally, did you notice how this text points to Jesus? The connections are stunning. Isaac was a long awaited, only son whose miraculous birth was the occasion of great celebration. Jesus was a long awaited, only son whose miraculous birth was the occasion of great celebration. Isaac carried the wood on which he would be sacrificed. So did Jesus. Neither Isaac nor Jesus put up a fight nor did they flee. Even the ram caught in the thicket by his horns foreshadows Christ with the crown of thorns. In addition, the land of Moriah, where all this takes place, is where Jerusalem and the temple would later be built. It's where Jesus would be taken by force, bound, and sacrificed.

Then there's the language: "Take your son, your only son" even as Jesus is "the only Son of the Father." In our text, Abraham says, "On this mountain, the LORD will provide" (v. 14). And in Jesus the Lord did provide on that mountain in Moriah. It's a three-day journey for Abraham and Isaac. It was a three-day journey for the Lord on Mt. Calvary (Friday, Saturday, and Sunday). Finally, according to God's commands, sacrifices were first killed and drained of blood; then they were placed on the altar as a sacrifice. Isaac was bound, alive, to the wood of the altar. Of course, there is ONLY ONE other living, bound sacrifice as recorded in the New Testament – Jesus!!

Jesus was the substitutionary sacrifice for Isaac and for you and me. He was the Lamb of God. There were no interruptions that stayed the hands of those who were crucifying our Lord. No voice from heaven said, "Do not lay a hand on the lad." Out of love for us the Father stood back and let it happen. Out of love for us, Jesus became the willing sacrifice. For us and for our salvation, the Father and His Son Jesus *worked together* to do what Abraham and Isaac could not—to rescue us all and bring us to everlasting life. So now, you are a descendant of Abraham and Isaac, not by blood but by faith. You are part of that number more numerous than the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore.

As they climbed Mt. Moriah, Abraham trusted somehow, the Lord would provide. And the Lord did provide . . . a lamb, the Lamb of God of takes away the sin of the world. That man with thorns on his head, carrying a heavy load of wood to the place where the Lord would provide, a true child of Abraham, was bound to a cross and sacrificed for you and for your salvation. All praise to him. Amen.