

Rev. Danny Mackey  
Lent 5 (Judica)  
March 18, 2018  
Genesis 22:1-14  
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Muncie, Ind.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

*“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 on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.”*

When I was in high school, I read a book that dealt with Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac. It was from the perspective of a Jewish father who had a daughter who struggled with a chronic, incurable illness. This Jewish father went all over, seeking out doctors and medical treatments, in a frustratingly futile attempt to save his daughter’s life. He compared his struggle to Abraham’s, his ancient blood relative, and asked the question “What kind of God would demand the death of father’s beloved child?” After much soul searching and agonizing introspection, this Jewish father came to a conclusion about the “Abraham dilemma,” as he called it. His conclusion was this: God is like us. Just as we’ve evolved, so God would’ve likewise evolved. And the God of today couldn’t be like the God in Abraham’s day. Therefore, God wouldn’t ask a father to let go—much less sacrifice—his beloved child. God, he concluded, has become better than that.

But has God? Has God *evolved*? Does God no longer demand sacrifice?

How about the other side? If God asked you to sacrifice your only child, would you do it? Would you, like Abraham, stack the wood on your child’s shoulders and walk your child up the mountain? Would you lay your child atop the wood? Would you raise the knife to slay your child? Would you fully expect to then take the fire and set your child’s body ablaze, watch the smoke ascend into heaven, and smell the flesh cook—all until nothing was left?

We’re not talking about simply allowing a child to succumb to illness, are we? No, we’re talking about homicide. We’re talking human sacrifice. Abhorrent, isn’t it? Disgusting. Makes-your-skin-crawl. And also really confusing. Baffling. Unthinkable. Inconceivable.

The Jewish father in that heart-wrenching tale didn’t look at things the way Abraham did. In fact, at the moment, neither are we. And, quite possibly, Abraham didn’t at first. The Lord’s command must’ve come as a great shock, a kick-in-the-gut and send-your-head-spinning shock. We might even go so far as to say, “That’s not the God I know. That’s not the God I’d believe in. That’s not the God that is Love.”

Before he was called out of Ur, Father Abraham worshipped false gods—gods that demanded sacrifices like child sacrifice. His descendants would worship that same type of god later, too. After the Exodus and the establishment of Israel, early 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C., King Manasseh led the Jews in worshipping Moloch, which included placing their infant children into the statue’s hands and watching their crying babies plummet into a fiery pit. Both Manasseh and Abraham should’ve known better. Abraham grew up hearing Noah tell about how he’d built an ark and the earth being flooded (Abraham was about 58 when Noah died). Also, Manasseh had been raised by King Hezekiah, who was a fairly decent king.

But Noah’s God was different than the false gods of Abraham’s fathers. He was a God that didn’t demand sacrifice and obedience like the false gods. He was a God that made promises—and kept those promises. He’d said that Abraham would have a child by Sarah—even when both of them were way too old—and that through that child a great nation and the Messiah would come. God kept His promise to 100-year-old Abraham and 90-year-old Sarah. They had a son, Isaac, the child of promise.

When that Jewish father was looking at God’s command to sacrifice Isaac, he looked at it from the vantage of the Law, that is, he looked at it as Abraham and believers need to obey and to submit to God’s will. Likewise, when we were considering “Abraham’s dilemma,” we were thinking about it according to the Law. God demands. We must obey. All that kind of thinking. And maybe Abraham thought that way at first. But he didn’t in the end. And he didn’t have to, because he had God’s promise: through Isaac your descendants shall become as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore; through Isaac shall the savior of all peoples be born.

Promise is what we call the Gospel. Gospel is only promise. In Latin it’d be something like *sola promissio* or *sola fide*. (I’m pretty lousy at Latin.) Many preachers use the word gospel as something we need to do: be nice, protect the environment, love your neighbor. All great things, but they’re not the Gospel. If you’re doing it, or supposed to do it, then it isn’t the Gospel. If you’ve got to sacrifice, give something up, make something right—not the Gospel. Why? Because there’s no promise. Gospel is about promise. No promise, no Gospel. Also, there’s no faith, no *fide*, because faith only relies on promises. Obedience doesn’t happen because of faith. Nope. It only happens because of fear.

So Abraham had two different words from God. He had the promise that from Isaac all the world would be blessed. And he had the command to kill Isaac. These two words might seem mutually exclusive—at least, that’s what our reason would say—but Abraham who had begotten and Sarah who had born a son in their old age trusted in the God who could work wonders and miracles, the God who could do the impossible. The author of Hebrews writes: “By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, ‘Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.’ He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back” (Heb 11:17-19).

Thus, Abraham trusted God’s promise, even though God’s command conflicted openly with all reason and with the law to not murder. He considered God to be truthful and worthy of trust. Abraham believed, and his faith was counted to him as righteousness.

So it is with all of you. God has made promises to you. He made them in the waters of Holy Baptism. In those waters He claimed you as His own dear child: “I am your Father and you are My beloved child.” You were joined to His Son Jesus—and joined in a particular way. You were joined to Jesus’ death on the cross and His resurrection from the tomb. God has promised you, “Just as I raised My Son from the dead and to eternal life, I will also raise you.” This is all promise, all Gospel.

Let’s ask our questions again. Has God *evolved*? Does God still demand sacrifice?

The answer is a resounding “No” to both. God hasn’t evolved. He can’t. He is immutable, unchangeable. This is part of His eternal nature. But God did demand sacrifice, didn’t He? Hasn’t that changed? Yes, He demanded sacrifice to pay for sin—the wages of sin is death, right? But that promised offspring of Abraham, the Messiah through Isaac, paid that price, gave that sacrifice, made atonement. And His sacrifice was so supreme, so complete, so valuable, that all other sacrifices became unnecessary. In fact, all the sacrifices made in the Old Testament, in comparison, were object lessons to teach God’s people of their need.

And that’s what Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac was, too. It wasn’t so that Abraham would slaughter his beloved son. No, it was how God showed Abraham that He would fulfill the promise. Or, as Abraham’s descendants put it, “On the mountain of the Lord it shall be provided.”

That mountain in the land of Moriah may have been the very same mountain we call Golgotha, or Calvary. In any case, the Lord provided His beloved Son, offering Him up for sin, once for all. Think again about sacrificing your dear child and you'll begin to glimpse what the heavenly Father went through. No angel stopped His hand. No caught-in-the-thicket ram took His Son's place. No, the heavenly Father killed His one and only-begotten, His unique Son whom He dearly loved. It's what He promised, and so it's what He did. And He did it all for you. Jesus died so that you might live. Jesus paid for your sin so that you might have the wealth of His righteousness. Jesus was despised and abandoned by the Father—"My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"—so that you might be loved and adopted as God's own dear child.

Now, that sounds more like our God! And He is. He is the God of Abraham and Isaac. The only God who makes promises and keeps them—the only God who can.

Before we wrap up this sermon, though, I'd like to share one final thought. It's about God being unchangeable and immutable. That's an extremely good thing, you know. The Lord isn't fickle. He doesn't change His mind. And that means He won't abandon His promises to you. He won't decide one day, "Oh, that thing about Jesus dying for your sins... well, I decided last week that it doesn't work that way anymore." No! You don't ever need to worry about the Gospel becoming untrue or out-of-date. He who promises is faithful. He says He will do it, and He will. And His promise to you, the promise to which you can cling in the face of all testing and trial, is that you have eternal life for the sake of His Christ.

In Jesus' name.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in + Christ Jesus.