

Genesis 22:1-19

Easter Sunday

Good morning and Happy Easter! To those of you who are regulars here at South Baton Rouge, it is good to see you all again this morning and, to those of you who may be visiting with us, or are continuing to visit with us, we want to say that we are glad you are here too and we hope that you will come and worship with us again, as often as you are able.

Now, while there is a very real sense in which every Sunday is “Easter” Sunday in that the Lord’s Day is *always* a celebration of Christ’s death and resurrection, it is nevertheless good and right that we set aside a *particular* day each year on which we remember the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ - not only as a deeply significant *spiritual* truth, but as an undeniable *historical fact*. This thing that we celebrate here - it *actually* happened, in space and time, which is vitally important since, as the apostle Paul said in 1st Corinthians 15:17,

.....if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.....

Easter Sunday is a celebration of the truth that, in fact, Christ HAS BEEN RAISED, and therefore our faith is NOT futile, and we who are his are NO LONGER “in our sins” - i.e., we are no longer burdened with the penalty of our sins, and are, therefore, reconciled to God.

That’s what the Easter message is all about. And this morning we want to look at that message and, in particular, at some of the Old Testament *background* to that message. In doing that, we will give our main attention to Genesis 22:1-19. These verses, as many of you will know, are a small part of a larger portion of the book of Genesis, which begins in Chapter 12, and that deals with the Life of Abraham. And, while this reading may not be that familiar to you as an *Easter* passage, the reality is that it remains one of the standard, traditional readings for the Easter season that can be found in *The Common Lectionary*, which those of you who have been part of more liturgical churches will be familiar with.

Now, by way of further introduction, I should say that those of you who have been with us for a little while will know that our study of this book of the Bible is nothing new since we have been looking at the Life of Abraham for a number of months now, ever since the end of last year. And some of you may also remember that in those early messages we found the roots of the *Christmas* story in the Abraham account and, as such, it is fitting that today, in this final sermon of the series, we find the roots of the *Easter* story in the same place. With that bit of introduction, let’s pray and then read a portion of the passage together....

(Pray and Read Genesis 22:1-2)

With this amazing, and in some ways, *bizarre*, account we find ourselves at the pinnacle of the Abraham story. Over the past few months, as we have looked at the big picture of this man's life, we have sometimes seen demonstrations of great faithfulness and trust in God. At other times we have seen how this very same man was capable of great faithLESSness and doubt and would not hesitate to deceive and manipulate things in order to protect his own interests.

And, yet, after tracing these patterns through more than 25 years of his life we have seen how Abraham, while still capable of doubting God and acting faithlessly, has nevertheless grown and matured over the years such that the Abraham we see in Genesis 22 is a changed man. He's not a perfect man, but he is definitely changing, for the better. His many trials and troubles have clearly been used by God to grow him up.

However, contrary to some contemporary notions about "growth", *Abraham's* growth has not resulted in his becoming more and more independent as a person. It has not caused him to be less and less aware of his need of God's grace. On the contrary, as Abraham has gone along, he has shown a growing sense of DEPENDence upon God and a greater willingness to rely on *God* to be faithful to his promises. And trusting God to fulfill his promises meant that Abraham was increasingly more willing to make decisions that *reflected* that trust. He was more frequently willing to follow the path of obedience, rather than resorting to his own cleverness or relying upon his own ability to bring about by human manipulation the things which God had promised to bring about in *His* way and *His* time.

And so, as we saw two weeks ago, when we got to the end of Genesis 21 - in the passage just before this one - we found a noticeably different Abraham than the one we started with back in Genesis 12. At the end of chapter 21 we found a maturing, settled, much steadier Abraham. We found a man who had *finally* received the long-promised and long-awaited son, and who had now settled down in the land of Promise and was worshiping the Lord again, in peace, with no threats from without, and no threats from within. Everything was just right. All systems were "Go".

For a moment.

But then something happened. As it turned out, there was still one threat to be dealt with. There was still one trial that lay before Abraham. *And he never saw it coming*. It came to him, out of the clear blue sky from what, to him, had to have been the most un-believable and unlikely source of all.

It came from God Himself.

And it must have caught Abraham completely off guard. It's like one of those suspense movies where you follow the hero through all these dangers and adventures and then, right at the end, when you think the crisis is over, one of the hero's companions - that you *thought* was with him all along - suddenly turns on him and threatens to undo everything. And the hero doesn't expect it and gets completely blind-sided.

At first glance, when you read Genesis 22, it seems like the same sort of thing is going on. The God who has been promising this child for years and years, and who has gone to great lengths to *protect* this child and *insure* its arrival - that same God now issues the bizarre and unthinkable command that Abraham is to now take this child to a designated spot and offer him up as a human sacrifice! And not *just* a human sacrifice - which was bad enough - a *child sacrifice*, no less.

And so begins the greatest test and challenge of Abraham's life.

(Read Genesis 22:3-8)

III) Second Move

Now, what is at least as amazing as this command that God issues, is the *response* that Abraham makes to the whole thing. With a calmness and acceptance that almost defies belief, Abraham responds to God's instructions, seemingly, *without even flinching*. There is no indication of any response or reaction whatsoever other than his immediately gathering together the people and supplies he will need to make the journey to the place where he will carry out these macabre instructions. And that, frankly, is just mind-blowing.

Think about this with me for a moment. This is the same Abraham who, when God announced what he would do with Sodom and Gomorrah, back in chapter 18 - *to a bunch of absolute strangers (with the exception of Lot)* - when that happened, Abraham bargained with God in order to see God's mercy toward these unspeakably wicked people. But now, when God's command involves *his killing his own flesh and blood* - this son he has waited 25 years for - on this matter Abraham is silent. He doesn't bargain. He doesn't say a word. And so, after receiving this breath-taking command from God, Abraham and son, and some others head off to carry out God's will.

Now, it seems clear from the text that Abraham has not shared the complete purpose of his journey with his son, at least not yet, nor with his servants. And it seems doubtful that he would have shared this with Sarah. But his purpose in doing so was not to deceive, this time, nor was it to avoid carrying out God's will but was, I believe, simply to keep his son from bearing the burden of what had to be done any longer than was absolutely necessary.

To make matters even more challenging - not only has God commanded Abraham to carry out this heart-breaking task, but he sends him to a place that will take 3 days to get to. In other words, he has three whole days to think about this thing. Three days to grieve in silence about what was going to happen. Two nights to lay in his bed, stare at the stars of promise, and perhaps wonder how and why God would have him do this crazy thing.

Surely these were the most difficult days of Abraham's life. And yet, it needs to be said that, as difficult as these things were, it seems clear from Scripture that Abraham did not wonder

and grieve as one who was completely without faith or hope. And the reason we know this is because we have the NT's own infallible commentary on this event in the book of Hebrews, chapter 11, verses 17-19, which reads,

.....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, ¹⁸ of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." ¹⁹ He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.....

What's the writer of Hebrews saying? He's saying that as Abraham was walking through this trial he did so as a man who held firmly to two undeniable and, humanly speaking, contradictory realities. On the one hand, he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that God had promised that through his son Isaac many descendants would come. On the other hand, he also knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that God had commanded him to take this same son and offer him up as a sacrifice. He didn't know *why* all of this was happening, but he could not deny the reality of either one of them and so he did the only thing a man of faith *could* do - He obeyed God and concluded that, since God was always true to His own promises, then if in fact he DID end up killing his own son then somehow God would bring that same son back to life - even though he had never seen such a thing, even though that sort of thinking was *completely outside of the box*.

But it tells you something about the character of Abraham's faith at this point in his life. This is *some kind of faith*. This is a believing-what-cannot-be-seen kind of faith, a *believing-what-had-never-had-been-seen* kind of faith. This is sheer faith. This is All- Your- Eggs- in- One- Basket sort of faith. Faith with no back-up plan, with no safety net.

And it is this insight from the writer of Hebrews that helps us understand more fully the response that Abraham gave when his son, quite astutely, asked where the sacrificial animal was. After three days, they got to the appropriate site and prepared to set out to make the sacrifice, just Abraham and his son. They had the wood. They had fire. But they had no lamb, no ram - they had nothing suitable for making a sacrifice. And to his son's question Abraham - somewhat cryptically - responded that *God would provide a lamb*. What was Abraham *thinking* at this point?

Well, when you take into account what Abraham said at the time, and combine that with the later insight from Hebrews, then it seems that as Abraham headed into this situation he was counting on one of two things happening - either God would provide a substitute sacrifice in place of his son or, if not, then, as we have seen, he believed that God would have him sacrifice the "lamb" that He had already provided - i.e., Isaac - and then, somehow, bring that same son back to life. That's pretty amazing stuff.

(Read Genesis 22:9-19)

IV Third Move

We noted previously the amazingly resolute manner in which Abraham accepted God's

instructions to sacrifice his son. Here we see that the description of *Isaac's* response is similar in nature. We hear of no shouting, no struggle, no additional questions, no pleading. It is possible that some of these things may have occurred. But it is notable that we get no *description* of them. Perhaps he was stunned into silence. Perhaps his father had assured him that, whatever happened, he would be alright in the end. We cannot say for certain. But the one thing we know is that the scene *portrayed* by the words here is one of resolute acceptance of the will of God, without fighting, resistance, or hesitation. The significance of that we will see in a moment.

Well, with his son bound and placed upon the altar, Abraham raises his knife and prepares to carry out the sacrifice when, at the last moment, as he is about to strike the death blow - at *that* point God intervenes, stopping Abraham and, instead, points him to a substitute that had been provided - a ram that appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, and which had gotten itself tangled up in some brush. And Abraham, no doubt with joy and relief, goes and retrieves this ram and then, together *with* his son, completes the sacrifice that they came to make.

And the text tells us at this point that the *reason* why God prevents Abraham from going through with the sacrifice, as originally commanded, was because "he now knew that Abraham feared God." Now this phrase, "now I know", is not saying that God is, in this moment, *realizing* something that he hadn't previously grasped. God is not gaining new information here. This is, as one scholar puts it, an "anthropomorphism" - it is language which depicts God as thinking or acting from within a very human perspective in order to better communicate some truth. Of *course* God knew - before any of this happened - what was in Abraham's heart, but God said what he did because Abraham's faith was, in a sense, incomplete until it had been demonstrated by actions which *proceeded* from that faith.

In other words, it was not enough that Abraham might have faith in some sort of *abstract* sense. It needed to be seen and indeed *worked out* in a concrete way. Not so much for God's sake as for Abraham's sake - and *ours*, actually. You see, Moses, in recording these events in this way, has preserved for - for all time - the truth of this crucial connection that exists between faith and obedience, a reality which is highlighted much later on, in the book of James when he writes,

James 2:21-23 *Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; ²³ and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness" - and he was called a friend of God....*

And so, again, it was not until Abraham's faith was realized in this extreme act of obedience that it was fully "known" and "revealed" for what it was.

Now, you may wonder, "Was it *really* necessary for God to go through all of this? Couldn't this whole event have been avoided?" Perhaps. We could have gotten to the end of the previous chapter - chapter 21 - and instead of this whole account of the sacrifice there might have been a simple, one sentence statement - "And because God knew Abraham's heart, and that

he would be faithful to obey even the most extreme command, then he was pleased with him, and he lived happily ever after” - or something like that. D

But if he *had* done something like that, then we would have missed out on this real-life picture of what faith and sacrifice and obedience were all about. If God had done that we might have misunderstood the connection between faith and works that is so clearly portrayed here. We would have missed out on this great portrait of a father’s love for his son being superceded only by his greater faith and trust in God. We would have missed out on this demonstration of the nature of substitutionary sacrifice in a way that is almost impossible to forget.

We would have missed out on all these things that now, and for all time, will stand as pointers to the connected-ness and purpose and unity between what God was doing in the OT and what he did in the NT, through Jesus.

And so God, in his great wisdom, chose not to give us merely *abstract* declarations about Abraham’s faith but, instead, through his providential purposes chose to show that faith in action.

And now that Abraham’s faith has been proven by his extreme obedience, God assures Abraham, once again, of the blessings that He has sovereignly committed Himself to bestowing upon him and his descendants. For his part, Abraham responds to all this by memorializing the occasion and giving the place where these events occurred the name - “The Lord will provide” - a name which, actually, spoke more truly than even Abraham knew.

Why? Because the place where they were - on a mountain in the land of Moriah - was, as a number of scholars have pointed out, to be the future site of the temple in which the sacrifices would take place and, by which, the people of God, for decades to come, would also see God’s provision for *them* and for their *sin* through the OT sacrificial system.

V Fourth Move - Connections and Conclusions

You know, when a writer puts together a novel, or a play there is, typically, a certain end or conclusion toward which he/she is working. And because he/she is trying to move the story toward this particular end, there will be a number of events and signs and indicators along the way which point the reader toward that conclusion, even if they are not fully appreciated at the time you come across them. However, when you actually DO get to the end, and you look *back* on what happened in the lead up to it, then all of the sudden so much of what happened before takes on a much deeper significance than it did initially.

Well, in very many ways, this is precisely what happens, and what *ought* to happen when we look at Genesis 22 in the light of Jesus’ death and resurrection. When we read this Genesis account through the lens of the Gospel we can see all sorts of things here which *anticipate* what God was planning to do later on in and through the events which we celebrate today as *Easter*. As we look at the characters of Abraham, and of Isaac, and even when we look at the Ram that is

eventually sacrificed in this story - through all of these things we have this *conflation* of images as all three of these “characters” point beyond themselves to other realities that we find in the account of Christ’s death and resurrection. Did you see all of them as we were going through? Because when you start to tally them up, they are really quite staggering.....

In verses 1-2, God commands Abraham to go and sacrifice his son, whom he loves - When we get to the NT, we hear the echo of that command in a number of places, including Luke 14:26, which says, “*If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple...*” What was Jesus saying? He was saying that love for him supercedes the love that we have, even for our own flesh and blood - the very thing that Abraham demonstrated. Indeed, the very thing that *God demonstrated* when, because of his commitment to his *own* holiness and justice and purposes he willingly gave up *His own Son*....

When we see the stark and sheer resolution of Abraham to carry out God’s will, whatever that might mean, we see the echo of that in Jesus’ - the seed of the woman, the son of Abraham, when he set his face resolutely to go to Jerusalem and endure God’s will for him in that place, whatever that might mean....

When we see the traveling party arrive at the designated place and we see Abraham in vs 6 take the wood to be used for the sacrifice and place it on his son Isaac’s back, we see in that the anticipation of the time when Jesus, the Son of God, would take a wooden cross on *his back*, to be used in his own sacrifice....

When we hear the words of Abraham in vs 8 - *that God will provide a lamb* - we see there the anticipation of Jesus, described by John the Baptist as “*The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*” and who, as the writer of Hebrews puts it is the one, final, all sufficient sacrifice that was acceptable to the Father...

When we see Isaac, bound and laid upon the altar, with no word of protest or resistance we see the anticipation of the prophecy concerning Jesus found in Isaiah 53, which reads, “*He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth...*”

When we see Abraham, in vs 10, raise his hand to slay his own son, we see the anticipation of the time when God the Father would, providentially speaking, *raise His hand to slay His own Son* as his purposes were being worked out.....

And when we see God stay the hand of Abraham, so that his Son is spared, I am reminded of the time when Jesus, in the Garden of Gethsemane, asked his own Father if

His hand might be stayed, if the “cup” he was about to drink might be foregone, and yet I am further reminded that Jesus was also more concerned that the Father’s will be done, even if it was God’s will to crush him. And it was. And with *Jesus*, God’s hand was not stayed....

When we see Abraham, in vs 13, take the substitute Ram provided by God and offer him up sacrificially in the place of Isaac, we see the anticipation of the time when, once again, God’s justice would demand one thing - our death - but His mercy would accept a substitute - Jesus’ death in our place....

And finally, when you think about the fact that Abraham arrived at the place of sacrifice **on the third day** and that it was then, after grieving and contemplating the loss of his son for three days, that he, as the writer of Hebrews says, *received back* this same son on that third day, I cannot help but think of our Lord’s resurrection when God the Father received back His own Son, and we received our Risen Savior on that third day that we know as Easter morning.....

The Gospel message is all over Genesis 22. Indeed, it is because of the Gospel message that we even *have* a Genesis 22. The death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ are the solid reality of which Genesis 22 is a faint foreshadowing. The very real, agonizing, heart-breaking events of Genesis 22 *pale in comparison* to what God the Father faced as he oversaw the destruction of His own Son. As Ligon Duncan puts it,

Abraham’s love for his son is a pale shadow of the Father’s love for His Son. And the heavenly Father is saying here, when you see My Son ascend to Calvary don’t you dare think that you love Him more than I do. And when we see Abraham’s hand raised to slay his son, the Father is saying, don’t you think that I’m some passive standby witness from a distance of what is happening at Calvary. I am the one who is bringing this to be and I’m doing it because it’s the only way that you can be spared from your sins. I’m not standing back at a distance and watching My son suffer. I am the One bringing it about. I am the one with the knife in My hand and that knife is there because it is absolutely necessary that a substitutionary sacrifice be given for you if you are to be with Me forever.

And that, my friends, is what Easter is all about.