

## THE OTHER SACRIFICE

I can't remember if I have shared this story with you before, but here's how it goes. A young man was proposing marriage to his girl friend, and he said to her, "I admit, I'm not wealthy like Gerald. I'm not as handsome as Gerald. I don't have a country estate or a yacht or a private plane like Gerald. But, my darling, I love you." The girl responded, "I love you too, but, tell me some more about Gerald!"

Let's make the jump quickly from being silly to being serious and state the obvious – life is all about making choices, isn't it? Day in and day out we choose: what we will wear, how to plan the day, what to eat (or not eat!), which movie we will see, what chores will be done and in what order, what phone calls to make, and so on. Then there are the big choices: what college? which major? what career and with which company? What are my gifts and what can I do that is meaningful and fulfilling? Where am I going, how will I get there, and who will go with me on this journey called life?

Now then, let's move even further from the silly and the serious in order to get to the scripture lesson. In the passage from Genesis 22, God was asking our spiritual ancestor, Abraham, to make a choice! God needed to know what kind of person Abraham was going to be? Was he willing to keep the covenant or not? Was Abraham intent on trusting and obeying the Lord, and was he able to commit himself to doing his part towards fulfilling the divine promise? Or, was Abraham content to follow a zigzag course of belief and unbelief throughout his life? Was Abraham ever going to be faithful or would he settle for his own inconsistent, halfhearted attempts at serving God?

Due to Abraham's spotty record of being faithful one time and unfaithful the next, the Lord God decided to put Abraham to the test – did Abraham trust Yahweh or not? The test and its end result would determine the true person and underscore his devotion to God – or not! The pattern of testing and deliverance that is introduced in this story is continued throughout the Bible. God allowed Job to be severely tested but later restored his health and his goods. Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness and then was ministered to by angels. Paul the Apostle was tested by way of his "thorn in the flesh," but through that experience he learned what it meant to depend upon God for his strength.

So, the Lord tested Abraham. If you thought last week's passage about Abraham banishing Hagar and their son Ishmael into the wilderness (with God's consent) was a difficult story to understand, this passage is even worse! God commanded Abraham to take his and Sarah's long-awaited and much loved son, Isaac, to Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that God would show him. Yikes!!!

It makes you wonder if God was contradicting himself. Whereas before Abraham had been asked to give up his past when he left Haran to go to the land that God would show him, now Abraham had to give up his whole future – not only his son but also the great nation to follow. Furthermore, this beloved child Isaac, who was given by God after long delay and miraculous birth, was to be given back to God in sacrifice.

Quite obviously, we creatures cannot fathom the ways of God. However, we have something that Abraham did not have. From our vantage point, we know how the story ends, whereas Abraham knew nothing of the sort. The story's conclusion tells us that God did not want the sacrifice at all; God only wanted Abraham to be willing to offer it. God's command was not in earnest, but Abraham didn't know that at all. Most likely, Abraham was familiar with the pagan rite of human sacrifice among his neighbors, but his God was different from all the rest! There is no record of complaints or questions.

As before when God first called him, Abraham arose and went forth, but this time he journeyed with his beloved son and two of his servants. For three days, Abraham obeyed and followed where Yahweh led him until he looked up and saw the place – the place where life would come to an end for Isaac. Abraham told the servants to stay behind while he and Isaac worshiped and then returned. Just as we saw Hagar's motherly love in action last week as she placed her dying son Ishmael under the shade of a bush (and then give him a life-saving drink of water!), this week we learn of Abraham's protective, fatherly love as he carried the dangerous objects of fire and knife while Isaac toted the wood for the burnt offering. When Isaac asked his father, "Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham told him that "God will provide the lamb."

You know this story. The drama builds bit by bit until, finally, Isaac was bound and placed atop the wood on top of the mountain. Abraham drew back the knife in order to slash and kill Isaac when, all of a sudden, the Lord said, "Abraham, Abraham! Do not do anything to the boy; for now I know that you fear

God, since you have not withheld your son from me.” Isaac was saved. Abraham was greatly relieved and filled with joy.

God was pleased with Abraham’s faithfulness and obedience to God’s command. Everything worked out well – except for the ram that was caught by its horns in a nearby thicket; God, in fact, did provide - the ram was sacrificed in Isaac’s place as a sign of Abraham’s grateful response to God’s saving grace.

Abraham had proven himself to be faithful. In the text, when Yahweh told Abraham, “Now I know that you fear God,” the word fear isn’t used in reference to a strong emotional response. Rather, “fear” means absolute obedience to the divine commands. God saw Abraham’s willingness to trust and obey – at all costs!

I have to confess, I still don’t fully understand this crazy story. I can buy into the idea of testing Abraham but what a test it was! Afterwards, Abraham returned to his servants alone (vs. 19); Isaac probably never came close to his dad again. What was Sarah’s reaction upon hearing of Isaac’s near death experience; legend has suggested that the shock of such news was what caused Sarah’s death a short time later. Also, after this story, God never spoke to Abraham again. Someone has suggested that God watched in disbelief as Abraham raised the knife to kill his son Isaac. “Why don’t you argue with me, now Abraham? How could you confront me about people you did not know in Sodom and Gomorrah, but you have no defense for your own flesh and blood? Do you truly believe I desire your blind obedience and actually would demand the murder of a child? What kind of God do you think I am?” (Lisa W. Davison, *Biblical Preaching Journal*, Spring 2002, p. 36) That’s quite a different spin on this ancient story!

So, what can we say about this text? What do these ancient words have to say to our modern lives? Fortunately for Abraham (and Isaac), for you and me, the emphasis of this story is not so much on Abraham’s faith and obedience (or lack thereof) as it is on the trustworthiness of God. That God provides a way out of the emotional wilderness within Abraham – and Isaac as well - by halting the execution shows God’s gracious faithfulness. Whether Abraham passed with flying colors or not, whether we are faithful or disobedient, the good news is that God is always and forever faithful, and God will provide. In last Sunday’s text, it was a much-needed drink of water; this Sunday, it’s a ram; for you and me, it may be something else – yet, also provided by the God of love.

Furthermore, this passage helps to “prime the pump” so we can hear the really good news of “the other sacrifice” concerning how God has provided for us through the Son, Jesus. The story of Abraham is treated as a kind of parable of the story of the crucifixion, and we hope that the one story will shed light on the other. And so it is that another young man walks up another mountain; instead of carrying the wood of the burnt offering, this man carries wood fashioned into a cross. God watches his Son trudge up the mountain to his death. “Father, where is the lamb? Everything’s here, the cross, the nails, but not the sacrifice.” “I will provide,” said the Father. The altar is made ready, the wooden cross is hoisted high against a threatening sky, and the Son cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” This time around, no one cries “Stop!” No one stops the sacrifice. And Jesus breathed his last and died. (thanks to Will Willimon)

One day on a mountaintop, God did that which God never asked anyone else to do, even his first servant, Abraham. What God would not let an earthly father do, God did himself. God once again provided the other sacrifice and this time it was God’s own Son, not a ram but the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. It has been said, “The crucifixion of Jesus is the ultimate expression of the testing of God. Like Abraham, Jesus in Gethsemane is in a situation where he must choose, and he trusts only the promise. And just as the passion sayings speak of the testing of the crucifixion, they also speak of the resurrection as God’s ultimate providing. The resurrection is the miracle by which God provides new life in a situation where only death is anticipated.” (Dr. Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation/Genesis*, p. 194)

Here, in this other sacrifice (and resurrection of Jesus), we see the grace of God at its very best. And, by grace, God has opened our eyes, our hearts, and minds to receive the truth of Jesus’ death and resurrection, and find our way home to God once again and forever. It starts and ends with the grace of God – nothing more and nothing less!

And yet, in between the beginning and ending of our lives, there is also something to be said about choosing to be faithful and obedient to God, in grateful response. We are called to go beyond merely trusting in God to save us and forgive us to include a life of Christian discipleship that seeks to grow in faith and faithful obedience. God wants us to sacrifice ourselves – to die to self so that we might live for God and others.

A translator working on the Wycliffe Bible was having a difficult time translating the New Testament into

a native dialect. He was particularly stumped by the word obedience. There was no native word for obedience. He struggled and struggled, but he simply could not find the word. One day he was going back to the compound where he lived, and while he was yet some distance, he whistled for his dog. The dog hearing his master's distinctive whistle jumped to his feet and ran and jumped into the arms of his master. One of the natives standing by who saw that dog said, "The missionary's dog was all ears." The missionary said, "That is my word," and he took that word and put it in the New Testament for the word obedience. The obedient Christian is "all ears." (William H. Hinson, *Triumphant Living in Turbulent Times*, pp. 88-89)

Let us always remember and seek to respond to the other sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ. And then, in grateful response, let us so choose to offer ourselves gladly and fully – to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Randall C. Stevens  
First Presbyterian Church/Martinsville, VA  
June 29, 2008)