

Nothing New Under the Son?

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
Olentangy Christian Reformed Church
Columbus, Ohio
June 29, 2008*

Genesis 22:1-19

Abraham, the father of multitudes, had two sons. Ishmael, the firstborn, was the son of the slave-girl Hagar, while Isaac was the son of Sarah, Abraham's wife. Isaac was welcomed with great celebration into the household of Abraham and Sarah, and he was fiercely loved. To protect young Isaac and his future from unwelcome challenge, Sarah insisted that Abraham send his son Ishmael away, along with his mother. And Abraham did so. He sent the two of them into the wilderness, into the hands of God.

Some time after these things, God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham." And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Please, take your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains, about which I tell you." And Abraham rose early in the morning, and he prepared his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. He split the wood for the burnt offering, and he rose, and he went toward the place about which God told him.

On the third day Abraham looked up and he saw the place in the distance. Abraham said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey. The boy and I are going up ahead. We will worship, and we will come back to you." Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and he put it on his son Isaac. He took in his own hand the fire and the butchering knife. And the two of them went together.

Isaac said to Abraham his father, "My father?" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" And Abraham said, "God will see to the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went together.

They came to the place about which God told him, and there Abraham built an altar. He arranged the wood, and he tied up his son Isaac and put him on the altar, on top of the wood. And Abraham reached out his hand and took the butchering knife to slaughter his son.

But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." The angel said, "Do not raise your hand against the boy, and do nothing to him, because I know now that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only one, from me."

Abraham looked up and he saw . . . a ram! caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took it, and he offered the ram as a burnt offering instead of his son. Abraham called that place *The Lord sees to it*. As it is said to this day, "On the mountain of the Lord, he will see to it."

The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, "By my own self I swear, the Lord declares: Because you have done this, because you have not withheld your son, your only one, I will bless you greatly, and I will multiply your descendants like the stars of the sky and the sand of the seashore. Your descendants will take control of their enemies' gates. And all the peoples of the earth will be blessed by your descendants – because you listened to my voice."

Abraham went back to his servants, and they rose and together they went to Beersheba. And Abraham lived in Beersheba.

Children's Story

One day, at the edge of the Great Forest, Sammy the Squirrel found a gold wristwatch. In no time that watch was his favorite thing in the whole world.

Of course, Sammy is a squirrel not a person, so he couldn't wear the gold watch on his wrist. Instead he had to wear it around his waist, like a belt. And that's just what he did.

Sammy wore his gold watch with pride. It was the first thing he put on in the morning. And it was the last thing he took off at night. Everywhere he went, he wore his gold waist-watch.

Then the Great Flood came. That spring it rained and it rained. Much of the Great Forest was under water. The animals had to leave for higher ground. But to get there, they had to cross Broken Bone Brook.

The water was flowing high and fast. It was a dangerous crossing. Nobody could take anything with them.

But Sammy wanted to take his gold waist-watch. It was waterproof after all. He tried to cross the swollen brook with the watch around his waist, but it was too heavy so he couldn't swim.

Finally Sammy had to take off his gold watch and leave it behind. It was the only way to get across. And at last he made it, without the watch.

Sermon

For some time now, and for good number of reasons, I have been bothered by the story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son Isaac. And last week, I found another reason to be bothered.

I think it's okay, by the way, to be bothered by the Bible. Characters in the Bible do disturbing things. God does some disturbing things, too. Things that raise questions, difficult questions, questions that deserve more than pious answers. So go ahead and be bothered. The Bible can take it. God can take it, too.

What bothered me last week, bothered me about the story of Abraham nearly sacrificing his son Isaac – what bothered me was the way that story wound down at the end. There was something about the final words of the angel, something about that list of promises, that just didn't sit right.

It's a story almost beyond comprehending. Parents these days are often criticized for being too wrapped up in their children. They pamper and primp and promote their pint-sized boy- and girl-wonders as if the future of the world were at stake. From gestation on, the course these children will take has been charted – from exclusive preschools all the way to the Ivy League, from well-appointed playrooms to equally well-appointed board rooms. Perhaps a more modest course is in store for those who don't occupy the pole position in the race to the top. In any case, though, parents are involved every step of the way.

Then there's Abraham and Isaac. Abraham was very wrapped up in this boy. (And, of course, Sarah was, too.) The future of Abraham's family was at stake. The distribution of Abraham's wealth was at stake. And, if the voice Abraham had heard was on track, the future of the world was at stake. So, yes, Abraham was very wrapped up in this boy Isaac.

He had been such a long time in coming, too. And the odds had been so long. But things had moved from improbable to impossible to promised. Then there was the waiting – until, at last, the promise became a boy. Not a boy-wonder, just a boy. But a boy on whose shoulders lay the future. And when Abraham watched that boy, he found peace at last. Peace, because all was in hand. Peace, because all was right and good.

Until Abraham heard again from the voice: "Take your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering." *Slaughter your son, Abraham! Butcher the boy! With one skillful fall of the knife fold up the future and put it away!* How could it be? It couldn't be! Could it be?

Abraham listened. Somehow Abraham listened to the voice. He took firewood, a flame, and a knife, and he set off to do violence to the face of the future. So many hopes and dreams falling apart! So many promises about to fail!

But there was the voice, the voice that had made the promises. Now the voice was testing Abraham. And somehow Abraham passed the test. He passed the test, and Isaac was spared. And the future was intact. And the world would be saved.

Then there are those final words from the angel. Promises again. Promises “because you listened to my voice.” Listen to the angel of the Lord: “I will bless you greatly, and I will multiply your descendants like the stars of the sky and the sand of the seashore. Your descendants will take control of their enemies’ gates. And all the peoples of the earth will be blessed by your descendants.”

It all sounds familiar, doesn’t it? That’s what bothers me.

Again and again, God had made promises to Abraham. The promises started simple, but became more involved. As time went on, the promises were not just reiterated. They were broadened. They were deepened. They were intensified. You can follow the development of the promises from Genesis 12 through Genesis 21. Then we have those final words of the angel in Genesis 22, the promises of the angel.

Here’s what bothers me about those words, those promises: There’s nothing new! There’s nothing new about them at all! Nothing broader. Nothing deeper. Nothing more intense. Abraham has just passed an excruciating test. Then the angel says, *Way to go! Atta boy! Oh and by the way, Abraham, we’ll keep things just the way they were.* Nothing new at all. Somehow I expected more than that. I wonder if Abraham did, too?

Maybe another case deserves some attention. God tested Abraham by bringing him to the verge of offering his only son Isaac. This was a test of Abraham’s faithfulness. To test whether he would put loyalty to God ahead even of loyalty to the expectations he had from God.

While God tested Abraham’s faithfulness, later God demonstrated his own faithfulness. God himself went to the verge of offering his only Son, whom he loved, Jesus. God himself went to the verge, only this time there was no voice to stay the execution. The slaughter was accomplished. And the heart of God was torn.

It wasn’t a mere demonstration. It wasn’t a capricious act. It was an act of faithfulness. By the slaughter of his own Son, God kept faith with Abraham. God’s Son was Abraham’s descendant also. And through this *son of Abraham*, God kept the promises he had made to Abraham: to bring blessing to all the peoples of the earth. Because this Son, in his dying and in his rising, defeated sin and evil and gave birth to a new creation, which is the home of justice and of peace and of flourishing life.

And by the way, when this Son was offered, there were no new promises. This Son was offered in order to fulfil the old promises. God’s purposes had not changed. God’s intentions had been in place from the beginning. And God had kept faith, even at such a cost. For the first time, a member of the divine family had taken on flesh. And for the first time that family had experienced death, the death of an everlasting member.

But no new promises. There is nothing new under the Son – not in this connection. Just God, keeping faith forever, keeping faith to his promises. Promises to overcome sin and evil, to liberate creation from bondage, to rescue people from dehumanizing powers, to restore human beings as his representatives within the creation, to fill the earth with his presence, and to do it all through Abraham, Israel, David, Jesus.

Now, that’s the theology, and it’s all well and good. But, so what? What is there to take away from this story about Abraham nearly sacrificing Isaac? What is there to take away from the absence of *new and improved* promises, whether in the case of Isaac or of Jesus? What is there to take away? To be honest, I’m not really sure. But let me try something.

Certainly there must be, in this story, an exhortation to faithfulness. Of course, the story is not about Abraham as an example. Just as God’s offering of Jesus is not merely an example to follow. Those stories have their own larger purposes. But there is something within those stories that calls for imitation. In both cases, what was most precious was surrendered, surrendered out of loyalty to God and to God’s longstanding purposes. So I wonder what precious thing I need to surrender. I wonder what precious things we need to surrender.

It's about what we value most, about what we may be prone to value too much.

What did Abraham value more than Isaac? Not just Isaac the person, the child, the son. But Isaac the focus of all the promises. Might Abraham have come to value Isaac more than he valued the promises themselves? And might he have come to value the promises more than God, who had made the promises? The test revealed the answers to these questions.

And what did God the Father value more than his only Son, the Son with whom there was an eternal bond of love and life? I don't pretend to grasp the psychology of the Holy Trinity, but surely it was no easy thing to surrender an only Son to death, even if for the sake of such great promises.

What do I value most? What do you value most? What do we value too much? What might we need to surrender because it stands between us and God? What might we need to surrender because it stands in the way of God's longstanding purposes, the purposes that don't change?

Surely this is not about sacrificing our children! But we do have our idols. That's what this is about. An idol, you may recall from the Heidelberg Catechism, is anything we have or invent that we trust in alongside of God, or instead of God. And we do have our idols. John Calvin said we are virtual idol factories. We churn out idols 'round the clock – and there's no downsizing with these factories!

So what do we value most? What do we value too much? What do we have that comes between us and God? What do we have that gets in the way of God's unchanging purposes?

I could make a list, I suppose. And I did think of doing that. But a list would only reflect my pet concerns, not necessarily God's concerns. Besides, every item I named on my list would only divert attention from and provide cover for ten things that I haven't named. So no list, not from me.

Here's a suggestion. Remember that God has come near to us in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit. Remember that God invites us to come near. Remember that God meets us when we gather in the name of Christ. Remember that God meets us through homeless veterans and through hungry ex-convicts. Remember these things, and pray to God: to reveal the idols that keep us distant from God, and by his Spirit to rob those idols of their power over us.

There's more. Remember God's purpose to set people free from their own sin. Remember God's purpose to give justice to people trapped by the sin of the powerful. Remember God's purpose that human beings look after the creation and look after each other. Remember God's purpose that the earth be filled with intimate knowledge of God. Remember God's purpose that children don't die, that old people live out their days with dignity, and that people who work hard can make a life for themselves and their loved ones. Remember these things, and pray to God to reveal the idols – pray to God to reveal the causes and goals that we are more devoted to than to these unchanging purposes of God. Pray to God to reveal my idols, your idols, the church's idols, our country's idols. And pray to God to send the Holy Spirit to unmask those idols and to dethrone them.

At least that much is asked of us, I think, by stories of great obedience, faithfulness, and sacrifice. Sure, some of those stories may bother us in part, here and there. But those stories lay claim to us nonetheless. And those stories urge upon us a corresponding faithfulness – through Jesus Christ our Lord.