

Sermon Pentecost 5A  
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All Saints, Mt. Pleasant  
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This summer, if you've been paying attention, you may have noticed that we've been hearing a lot about Abraham. We heard how he was called to be the father of a great nation. We heard how in his times of doubt, some questionable decisions threatened the promise. We heard how God's messengers visited him and Sarah in their old age to assure them that indeed God would fulfill God's promise and send them a son, Isaac, their long-awaited miracle child.

In our usual three-year lectionary cycle, we typically don't hear quite so much of Abraham's story, but this year, the worship team selected to read the "alternate" First Readings, called the "semicontinuous" options, as they bring some stories like these into the rotation that we don't often read in worship. Our hope is that this will give our congregation an opportunity to consider a wider variety of Biblical content than we typically get to hear. So today in our First Lesson, we hear the last installment of the Abraham story, and then in subsequent weeks, we'll hear about his son Isaac, and then Jacob, then on to Jacob's twelve sons, the story of Joseph in Egypt, Moses etc.

Today we find Abraham, an old man, with his beloved son, his long-awaited son, his almost-never-happened son, Isaac, being asked to do the unthinkable - to follow God's call up the mountain to offer a sacrifice - the sacrifice of his son. He was promised this child. He waited so long for this child. He uprooted his whole life in preparation for this child. And now, he is being asked once again to place his trust in God...the way he did when he was told to leave his homeland to follow a voice...the way he did when he was told that in his old age he would have a son...the way he did when he was told his elderly wife would bear the child...and because it was God who gave him the child, Abraham obeys.

The reading from Genesis says that Abraham rises early in the morning. Why so early, Abraham? Who are you trying to avoid? Could it be Sarah? 'Cause she surely was not consulted in this decision...! And Abraham gathers the firewood, and he lays the wood across the shoulders of his son, and up the mountain they go. And along the way, Abraham assures Isaac, "God will provide."

Up on the hill, Abraham prepares the wood for the sacrifice, and he even goes so far as to bind Isaac, lay him down, and raise his arm. when the angel of the Lord intervenes, stopping him and commending him for his ultimate act of obedience. In his relief, Abraham sees that indeed God has provided when he sees a ram there, tangled in the thicket. And then there's one final component to the story that doesn't get included in today's verses - a blessing. Because of Abraham's trust, he receives a divine blessing: A renewal of the promise that Isaac will live on to become the father of "offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven" and that "by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth" will be blessed.

The closing chapter of Abraham's story seals the covenant God has made with him, not with sacrifice, but with trust, with grace, and with a blessing. God did not require the sacrifice of Abraham's son, but he did require his trust - trust that God will provide. And in return, Grace was issued in a word

from heaven and in the form of the ram, and a blessing was issued - in the promise that this covenant stands and will remain, beyond Abraham and Sarah, beyond Isaac and Jacob, until through them all the nations of the earth are blessed.

Now we saw previously that Abraham struggled a little bit with God's promise. He struggled to lean into this bond of trust. He struggled not to see this covenant with God as purely transactional, like the practices of other peoples and their "gods." In this case if Abraham had been narrowly focused on a transactional instead of a relational dynamic with his God, he may not have stopped and heard the angel's message of grace. He may not have looked up and seen the ram of God's provision. The outcome of this journey may have been very different.

But let's not talk about that. Let's talk about grace. I think Christians can often be mistaken in thinking that "Grace" was introduced when Jesus came to earth, that the God of the Old Testament was a God of wrath until Jesus' sacrifice somehow satisfied God. But if we spend some time in these Old Testament texts, we see Grace abounding from these earliest stories of God's people in the book of Genesis. Grace in the garden, grace in the Ark, grace in the mark of Cain, grace in a ram tangled in the thorns.

Yes, when read through the lens of our 21st-century sensibilities, many aspects of these stories just hit different. There are some extremely challenging aspects to these early texts, including today's story! And we will continue to wrestle with those parts...but we will never claim that grace was absent. We will be reminded that no matter how our understanding and our collective experience of God has evolved over the centuries, that God, the one who is, who was and who is to come, is, and always has been, a God of Grace.

And as we walk through these stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs, we see God shaping and forming for himself a people, establishing with them what kind of a God is the Lord, inviting them into a deep trust, into a relationship, which when used as the firm foundation of faith will always lead to revelations of God's grace and a life filled with blessing. And remember, the kind of blessing Abraham, Sarah and Isaac receive is the kind that doesn't just stay among you, doesn't just fill your cup, but it overflows to become blessing for others, for the world. God said: "You are blessed to be a blessing" That's grace.

Many parallels have been drawn over the years between the story of Isaac and the story of Jesus. Both long-awaited and beloved sons, both obedient to the will of their father, even to carrying the wood of their own sacrifice up the mount. But while Isaac was spared, and replaced by the ram, Jesus went willingly to the cross, himself to become the sacrificial lamb for our sake. God did not require the sacrifice of Isaac. From Abraham, God only required obedience. And misinterpretations of Jesus' actions on the cross might say that God required the sacrifice of Jesus in order to cover the disobedience of humanity. But once again, that would have us sliding back into a transactional instead of relational way of thinking about God.

Let's think about it this way instead: God does not require a sacrifice to atone for our sin, Instead, God himself, in the person of Jesus, came among us to become the sacrifice. In Jesus, the Second person of the Trinity, God alone had the power to release us from the hold that sin and death had over us. In the divine gift on Calvary, instead of a "this-for-that" exchange, Jesus provided a

“once-for-all” solution, where through unending love, God himself became the atoning sacrifice for the sake of the world. The lamb of God? The lamb was God. And through this divine mystery, once again comes Grace, once again comes blessing. Through this ultimate expression of God’s loving relationship with his people, comes resurrection, the victory won over the powers that plague us. The release of Christ from the grave, the release of the captives of hades, and the release of each and every one of us from the bondage to sin.

On Mount Moriah, an angel came to tell Abraham that God will provide, to unbind his son and set him free. At Gethsemane, angels told the faithful women that God again provided a way - that Jesus had been freed to set all people free. Through his faith, Abraham received a renewal of the covenant that he would indeed be blessed to be a blessing to all nations. Through the faithfulness of Christ, we have become inheritors of the covenant made new through his own body and blood, so that, fed by this gift, we too would receive a blessing to carry on to all nations. God does not require of us a sacrifice, but instead a relationship of trust and obedience. Through the Holy Spirit, God invites us to open our ears to his calling, and join with our forefathers and foremothers in following him in faith.

He calls us to bring our own children, not to a fire, but to the water, not for a transaction, but for a loving relationship, to bind them to Christ’s love, to entrust them to his care, to come expecting provision, grace, and blessing. He calls each of us to present our lives to him as a living sacrifice. We lay down what we hold dear, turning ourselves over to God trusting in God’s grace, that God will provide, that God will bless.

Let the Holy Spirit open your ears: What messages may the angels in your life be trying to convey to you? Let the Spirit open your eyes: In what ways might God already be providing exactly what you need? Let the Spirit open your heart: How might God be calling you into a deeper relationship of trust with him? What might God be calling you to lay down before him? What might God be calling you to bind up and hand over to his guidance, his provision, his creative work? What might God be calling you to unbind? To let go of and place in his hand?

Martin Luther said: “I have held many things in my hands, and I have lost them all; but whatever I have placed in God's hands, that I still possess.” God will provide; trust in him. God’s grace still abounds; trust in it! God’s hand still blesses; open your hands to him, release to God what you cannot carry, receive God’s blessing, and you will be a blessing to others.