

**Foundational Stories Series**  
**“The Akedah: From Binding to Offering”**  
**Sermon on Genesis 22:1-14 (7/12 & 7/13/14)**  
**Jennifer M. Hallenbeck**

---

Last weekend, we began a sermon series called *Foundational Stories*. For the next many weeks – until the end of August – we'll be getting to know some of the people of the book of Genesis...people like Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Esau. We'll be getting to know Rachel, Leah, Joseph and his siblings.

These are the people whose faith started it all for us: they are the founding fathers and mothers of Judaism – they are the first Israelites, and we Christians trace our roots back to them. So I thought, what better way for us to begin getting to know each other than by getting to know the people of these foundational stories.

And, most importantly, as we get to know the people of these foundational stories, we'll also be getting to know their relationship with God. Because that's what so much of the Bible is: the story of our people's relationship with God. Its ups, its downs, its promises...*our* failures and *God's* steadfastness.

//

We began this *Foundational Stories* series last weekend with the most foundational story of all – the story of Creation. That is the story that sets the stage for everything.

In the Creation story, we learn about the holy One who made it all. If we take the Creation story seriously, we keep it in mind as we read every *other* story in the Bible...and they are *all*, first and foremost, about God.

//

Toward the end of the Creation story, when God makes humankind, we learn that we have been invited into a unique kind of relationship with God. We have been given stewardship of the earth and we have been blessed with the ability to think, to feel, and to understand the gift of relationship – not only relationship with other human beings, but also relationship with God.

So the first story of this *Foundational Stories* series was last week's Creation story. And today's story is, in my humble opinion, one of the most challenging stories in the entire Bible. I mean, it's a story about Abraham nearly sacrificing his precious – and his *only* – child.

This story is a pivotal story for the world's three monotheistic religions... Judaism, Christianity, and Islam *all* trace their roots to this very story. And it is an awful, awful story. You could argue it has a “happy ending,” but the events leading up to that ending are far from happy.

But, before I go into the actual reading from Genesis 22 – before we really delve into this awful story – let me do a brief recap on what's happened between the Creation and *today's* story. (You may need to tighten your listening cap here for a few minutes...

I'm going to cover some very significant biblical history, in a very short period of time.)  
//

If you were here in worship last weekend, you have perhaps noticed we skipped about 21 chapters in Genesis from last week to today. The Creation story is, obviously, chapter *one* of Genesis – the very beginning – and now here we are, one week later, in chapter *twenty-two*. That's a big jump.

In those other chapters – chapters two through 21 – we meet some very important folks: we meet Adam, Eve, and their sons Cain and Abel...we meet Noah and his family...we meet the people of Babel...we meet the people of Sodom and Gomorrah...and we meet Hagar and Ishmael.

Those people and their stories are extremely important – they are sermon series in and of themselves. But, during *this* series, we're not going to focus on them...because we are focusing on Abraham, Sarah, and their more direct descendants.

//

Abraham enters the biblical story in chapter 11 of Genesis...and from that point, God initiates a special kind of relationship with him that Abraham then reciprocates: Abraham commits – he *chooses* – to be in relationship with God. It's from this choice that we recognize the Jewish people as God's “chosen” people.

Abraham eventually became the father of the Israelites – the father of the Jewish people...the people who chose to follow *this* God over the gods of other ancient peoples.

In chapter 12 of Genesis, God made an extremely important, three-fold promise to Abraham: God promises land, descendants, and blessing. (I want you to hang onto this three-fold promise...we'll be coming back to it in the coming weeks.)

Again, God promised Abraham land, descendants, and blessing. This is why the land of Israel is called the “promised land” for the Jewish people – because it is the land promised to them by God way back in Genesis 12.

And God promised descendants, too...which, for Abraham, was a bit of a problem, because, see, even though God promised him descendants, Abraham and his wife, Sarah, struggled with infertility.

Yet...in Genesis 17 and 18, we learn that God keeps promises – even when it seems impossible. And so, very late in their life together, God assured Abraham and Sarah they would, in fact, have their own biological child.

When God offered this word of assurance, Sarah was clearly post-menopausal. It all struck the old couple as being quite funny – and they laughed. So, when their son was born, they named him “Isaac” – which, in Hebrew, means “laughter.”

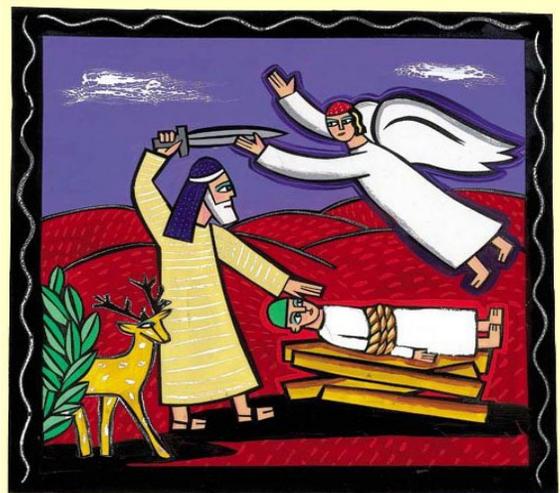
//

Now, surely these parents treasured their long-hoped-for son. It's hard to even begin to imagine how Abraham felt when, in today's story, he sensed God was calling him to literally offer his son to God through ritual sacrifice.

The biblical text does not tell us how old Isaac was at the time of today's story...but, whether Isaac was seven or seventeen, we can be confident this was not a welcome twist in the plot of Abraham's life.

When God promises descendants, and then you only have one child with your wife – and you love that child desperately – well...I imagine Abraham was devastated by God's request.

//



As the story goes in Genesis 22, Abraham and Isaac went on a long journey to a mountain in the region of Moriah, where this sacrifice was to take place.

In addition to his son, Abraham brought with him two of his servants, as well as the wood needed to burn the offering fire, and, of course, a knife to kill the offering itself.

On the third day of their journey, they got close to the divinely directed destination...and Abraham and Isaac continued along without the servants.

“Stay here with the donkey,” Abraham said to the servants. “The boy and I will walk up there, worship, and then come back to you.”

Now, I have read this story so many times...but, this week as I read it, my heart broke and I nearly cried as I read the next part:

“Abraham took the wood for the entirely burned offering and laid it on his son Isaac. He took the fire and the knife in his hand, and the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, 'My father?' Abraham said, 'I'm here, my son.' Isaac said, 'Here is the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the entirely burned offering?'” I may be reading into the text what isn't actually there, but when Isaac asks this question – “where is the lamb for the offering?” – you can't help but wonder if a sort of

gut-level dread had begun to build inside of him. The wood was on *his* back. His father had the knife. And the fire. He was ready to kill and burn *something*...

*“Father...where is the lamb for the offering?”* Perhaps it was the innocent question of a curious child. Perhaps it wasn't so innocent.

“The lamb for the offering?” Abraham replied. “God will see to it.” God will provide.

Don't you wonder how long it must have taken Abraham to walk those final steps to the place where God wanted him to build an altar? I'm not a parent...but I have to believe that, with every step, Abraham was silently begging God to give him a way out of this sacrifice.

But, as the story continues, God continues *not* to provide a way out. And Abraham built an altar. He tied up his son...and laid him on the altar. He even went so far as to raise his knife-laden hand, ready to bring it down onto his beloved child. And *that* is the moment God provided a way out.

With Abraham's knife poised, ready to kill, an angel of the Lord called from heaven and said, essentially, “Stop! God now understands your trust – God now understands your level of total commitment.”

Then, in that moment, when Abraham looked up, he noticed a ram in a nearby thicket and sacrificed the *ram* as his offering to God that day. As Abraham's understood it, God had spared his son...and so he named that place “God will see to it.” Or, “God will provide.”

// //

Oswald Chambers, a Scottish minister and writer who lived around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, once wrote something that seems to define the kind of trust – the kind of faith – Abraham displayed in today's story. Chambers wrote, “Faith never knows where it is being led, but it loves and knows the One who is leading.”

That is truly the life of faith. That is truly life for every single one of us who claims faith in Jesus Christ. We are people of *faith*...and, as the quote says, “faith never knows where it is being led, but it loves and knows the One who is leading.”

We may not always know *where* God is calling us or *why* God is calling us. We may not understand the path down which God leads us...but knowing and understanding are not the point: the point is loving the One who is leading.

That's the life to which we are called...and that most certainly was the life Abraham led. Evidenced perhaps especially in today's story.

// //

Now...there is so much in this story worth exploring and I could have chosen any number of different pieces on which to focus.

I could have chosen to further explore how *Isaac* might have felt in the midst of all this. I could have chosen to explore how the father-son relationship between Abraham and Isaac might have shifted after this experience.

Despite relief on both their parts when that ram showed-up, you have to wonder what that walk back down the mountain was like...for both father *and* son.

I could have chosen in this sermon to consider *Sarah's* feelings...perhaps some of you mothers thought about her. She is so absent from this story, but, as Isaac's mother, you can't help but wonder what she was thinking and feeling from afar.

I could have chosen to focus on how this story is communicating that *this* God is different from other gods because, unlike the gods worshiped by others at the time, *this* God does not – in the end – require child sacrifice.

I could have chosen to focus on any of these pieces of the story.

But, for now – for this sermon, for this series – what strikes me most is the faith found within it: the kind of trust that will take step after step, constantly hoping God might offer something different...faith that has sacrifice at its very core. Trust that understands even what we love most in the world is a gift God intends to use as an offering – not as a ritual sacrifice, of course, but as an offering nonetheless.

//

In reading this story this time around, I was struck by Abraham's use of the word “worship” to describe what he and Isaac were going to go do.

“Stay here with the donkey,” he told the servants. “The boy and I will walk up there, we will worship, and then come back to you.” Abraham didn't say, “We will make our sacrifice” or, “We will give our offering.” No. He simply said, “We will *worship*.” And he said that because to worship *is* to offer...to worship *is* to sacrifice.

//

In most worship services in most churches I'm aware of, “the offering” is often not a big deal. In fact, other than that we might get to hear some lovely music, many of us might wish we didn't have to have an offering time in the service at all. It can be awkward, right? We might think, “What if I don't have anything to put in the offering plate today?”

Or, “I'm not really part of this church yet...do I *have* to give something?” Or, “I only give once a month and this isn't the week...” Or, “My giving is automatically taken out of my bank account, so I hardly *ever* have anything to actually put in the offering! Will people think I never give if they don't see me put something in the plate as it goes by?” (That's the kind of thing *I* think about, anyway!)

For these reasons and more, I think sometimes we wish the offering part of the worship service simply didn't exist. Yet, from the beginning, *worship was offering*: the offering was the entire worship service.

*“The boy and I will walk up there, we will worship, and then come back to you.”*

Abraham and Isaac weren't going to sing a bunch of songs, they weren't going to read the Bible, they weren't going to listen to a sermon...they were just going to making an offering. *That* was the most important part.

Because making an offering is a way of saying “thank you” to the God who provides. Because making an offering is a sign of faith. When we give money during worship, it's a sign of trust that the money we give through the church belongs to God and that God will provide what we need even without that chunk of our paycheck.

Our worship is also an offering of our time: in a world that's pace seems to quicken every day, by being *here* week after week, we are trusting that every other hour of the day will be sufficient to do what needs to be done.

But, most of all, worship is an offering of our very lives. It is not simply about giving our time and our money and our thanks to God...for, in worship, we hear God's word proclaimed. In that proclamation, God calls our names – just like God called Abraham's name in today's reading – and we are asked to respond with, “I'm here...Here I am. Do with me what you created me to do.”

Offering is central to worship...and, in worship, God asks us to offer our *lives* – to offer every breath, every moment, every step, every part of every day. God deserves it all. Because God *does* provide...though sometimes it's not in the way we might first hope.

Sometimes within God's provision there is sacrifice: our health changes on us, our employment changes, deployment happens, people come into our lives...and people go out of our lives. Yet, no matter what, we are asked to trust that around the next corner God will offer us a gift we could never have anticipated.

And when that happens, our faith is strengthened. When that happens – when God offers unexpected provision – we are called to worship. We are called to make our own offering. We are called to say “thank you.”

// //

In The United Methodist Church, we don't often have altar calls during our worship services. For those of you who may be unfamiliar with the altar call, it's when a leader invites you to come forward to the altar to kneel and make a commitment to follow Jesus Christ or to *renew* your commitment.

It's not many United Methodist Churches that do that – we often seem to think that's “too evangelical” for us. So, we don't usually have altar calls.

But, most of us *do* have a time of offering. And that time is critically important because, even if we're not coming forward to the altar, during the time of offering, we're still invited to consider God's love and provision for us – and how we are being called to give back in thanks.

// //

Today's story from Genesis chapter 22 is sometimes called The Akedah because the word “akedah” is Hebrew for “binding.” This story is about the *binding* of Isaac...*binding* – akedah.

In this story, the thing that was most precious in the world to Abraham – his one and only son – was *bound*...prepared for sacrifice. And Abraham was ready to give Isaac to God – as awful as we might think that seems today.

Yet God provided. Isaac was cut free of his binding, and Abraham gave a *different* kind of offering to God in thanksgiving.

//

It's not quite the same...but there are things binding us, right? Things that keep us bound, that hold us back, that keep us from offering ourselves and our gifts fully to God...there are things that bind us, right?

Well, friends, it's time to cut that binding loose. It's to ask God to release that which binds us...so we might more fully give ourselves to God. *That* is how we can say “thank you” for God's provision. *That* is how we can say, “Here I am.” *That* is how our very lives can become offerings to God. Today, tomorrow, always. May it be so. Amen.