

Rev. Jerry Deck
Genesis 22:1 – 19

September 21, 2014

Roots
The Present

Well, last week we were introduced to Father Abraham, or Abram as he was then called. Abram, as you may recall, was called by God to “leave his country, his people and his father’s household.” Where he was to go, he did not know, he just knew that he was called to depart. Not only that, but in Abram’s leaving, God promised that he would be blessed in ways that he would not had he decided to stay at home. And, furthermore, as he was blessed he was called to then go out and be a blessing. That God was inviting him, as he invites all of us as Abraham’s children, to be a part of God’s kingdom, of helping others to experience the blessing of knowing and being loved by our creator.

And so Abram did exactly what God had called him to and he left. But then, well, famine came along and he was forced to go to Egypt. And as he arrived in Egypt all of a sudden the promise that God had give to Abram seemed a bit less clear, a bit less convincing. So Abram decided to take matters into his own hands. In order to make sure that he was not harmed, he told others that his wife was actually his sister, so that he would not be killed. But this action ended up causing trouble in Egypt and before you know it Abram and his wife and their families were off again. And even though Abram’s trust had wavered, God’s promise was still upon Abram.

And in the chapters between where we stopped last week and where we are this week we see similar things continuing to happen. Abraham trusts at times and then he struggles to trust, even doing the whole “she’s not my wife, she’s my sister” thing again. But after all that, and after coming up with his own way to have a child, when it seemed like God was not going to come through, finally, 25 years later, the promise that God has made to Abraham comes true in the birth of Isaac. Let me repeat that once more. The promise that God had made to Abraham 25 years earlier, finally comes true.

The future then, is looking quite beautiful for Abraham and Sarah. The thing they’d been waiting for has come to fruition and things are looking up. It’s hard to know how much time has passed since Isaac’s birth and our story today, but most scholars think that Isaac is probably 8-12 years old when God comes down to speak to Abraham again. “Abraham”. “Here I am,” says Abraham. “Take your son,” (Okay, I got it), “Your only son, Isaac” (yeah, I said I got it), “the one you love (yeah...okay) and go to Moriah.” Alright, Abraham’s probably thinking, no problem. I’ve marched off before when God has asked so I can do that again. “Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.”

Now, let me take a step back from the story and say, “What?!” What kind of story is this and why in the world would you include it in a children’s Bible? I mean I

seriously contemplated having Scott preach this so that I wouldn't have to touch it. That said, I do remember learning this story as a kid, but for some reason I don't ever remember being all that bothered by it. Maybe it's because I didn't really get it, or didn't understand death or whatever, but it didn't bother me. But it does now. It brings up a ton of questions that I have for God. Why in the world would he do this and why in the world would it be included, not only in the children's Bible, but in the Bible at all? There are a plethora of strange and seemingly unanswerable questions about why God works the way he does when it comes to this story.

Perhaps one of the biggest questions, as I look at this as a father, is why did Abraham respond as he did. I mean God tells him to go and sacrifice his son and the very next thing we hear is, "Early the next morning, Abraham got up and saddled his donkey and they started marching toward Moriah." Where are the questions? Where's the anger? Where's the confusion? Where's the demand for the reason and for the logic of this command? Where's the, "No way, you're crazy?" But, as once scholar put it, all we hear from Abraham are his footsteps as he begins walking with Isaac toward Moriah. And I for one find that completely unsatisfying. I for one, think that God has some questions to answer as to why he would allow something like this to happen. Why would Abraham be so silent?

When I was going to seminary I spent a summer working as a hospital chaplain in Kansas City. I had not really looked forward to doing this chaplaincy, but it was a requirement for me if I wanted to be ordained, and so I didn't have much of a choice. After the first few days I began to think that this wasn't going to be so bad after all. The cafeteria had some pretty good cookies. I got this cool beeper which made me feel important, you know, "Oh sorry I gotta' go, there's an emergency." It even got me out of a speeding ticket one time, but that's another story for another day. So anyway, once a week we had to stay overnight at the hospital in case there was something urgent that they needed a chaplain for. My first overnight was scheduled about 6 days into my time there. They gave me this hospital room where I could sleep and so I sat there flipping through channels, raising and lowering my bed, and pondering whether or not it would be rude to hit the nurse's button to see if he or she would bring me something to drink.

Finally about 11:30 or so I went to bed and then at around 2:30 the aforementioned beeper went off, indicating that I was needed down in the E.R. So, I quickly jumped up and tried to quickly make myself look more "chaplainy" and headed down to the E.R. AS I walked into the room it was absolute chaos. Doctors and nurses were running around, commands were flying left and right and there in front of me, lying on the bed, was a 19-year-old boy who had been shot and was barely holding on. I felt like I climbed through the television and landed inside a show like Grey's Anatomy and I kept thinking that at any moment someone was going to look over at me and say, "Who are you and what are you doing in here?!" That lost look must have shown up on my face because a few minutes later one of the nurses told me that I needed to go out into the waiting room and tell the family that he was going to surgery. It was clear that they didn't think he was going to make it.

As they rushed him into the operating room I slowly walked toward the waiting room and as I opened the doors I was met with several sets of eyes that had clearly been staring at the door, waiting to hear about their son, grandson, nephew or friend. After telling them the situation, some began to weep, others grabbed one another and a few just stared at me in disbelief. I could see that they wanted more from me.

And they kept wanting more. They wanted more four hours later when surgery was over and the doctor told them that they didn't think he was going to make it. And they wanted a lot more a couple of hours later when we were all circled around him in his hospital bed and this 19 year old breathed his last breath. They wanted answers. They wanted the logic behind it, the reasoning. They wanted an explanation for how God could have allowed this to happen. They looked at me as the chaplain, as the "man of God" and thought that I should be able to answer for God. And I had nothing to offer them. I searched for words, I searched for reassurance. But in those times of incredible tragedy-when life makes absolutely no sense at all, there's just not much you can say.

Yes, you can say that God is with them. And yes, you can remind people of the hope of the resurrection. But when your 19-year old son's life has come to end you want more than that. And sometimes all you can offer is silence.

I guess I wonder as I think about this story of Abraham and Isaac, whether or not the silence we hear from Abraham as he walks to Moriah, is not because of indifference or because he thinks it's fair, but is because he cares so much and loves his son so much that all he can do is just put one foot in front of the other and keep walking step after step after step. Times that as much as he might want an answer or explanation from God, that he knows, as painful as it may be, that he may not receive it. And so he simply keeps walking as God has told him to do. And I know that Abraham is not alone in that. It doesn't take being a pastor very long to learn that most people have experienced tragedy in their own lives and almost all of us want an explanation for why our loved one died too young or why abuse happens and on and on these questions, these understandable questions keep going. We want answers from God that sometimes we simply don't receive. And sometimes people stop walking, out of anger or fear or confusion.

There is though one time when we hear Abraham speak. It is in response to his son's insightful question about where the lamb is that will be sacrificed. Abraham responds that God will provide. In one sense this seems to dodge the question. But what is interesting is that the Hebrew word for which we translate "provide" literally means "to see". In other words, Abraham is saying explicitly, "God sees" which implicitly means "and I do not." And what's important to see about this is that the faith of Abraham does not explain everything nor does it mean that everything will make sense, it simply means that Abraham believes God sees everything and he knows that he does not. To put it more bluntly it is a statement that God is God and I

am not. Will there be times on this earth when we see as God see and things eventually make sense? Sure. For Abraham, there was eventually a ram that did take Isaac's place. But there will also be times when, on this side of life, we will never see as God sees, when those questions will never be answered and we will have to ask, as Dennis Bratcher puts it, whether we are "willing to trust in a God who doesn't always act in the way we think he should?"

But of course, a God who always acts as we think he should and does what we want ends up looking a lot less like God and a lot more like, well, us. Interestingly enough, it ends up taking us back to the story of Adam and Eve and the question of whether or not we really trust that God loves us, in spite of the difficult situations in which we might find ourselves. To be sure, it is okay to ask questions or to grieve or be confused or to ask why. The question though that we must also answer is whether or not we are willing to keep walking as God has called us to walk. This is a story, a raw, vulnerable, honest story, about real faith. This is not a story that perhaps leaves us jumping for joy as we walk out these doors, but it is a story that, in the shadows of life we may need to hold onto as a reminder that God sees even when we don't and that sometimes we have to just keep walking, keep trusting, keep hoping.

But I also have to say that while it is an important story for folks going through difficult challenges, it is not exactly what you think about being a perfect story to talk about on a Sunday when you are baptizing a child. Especially a child who is the firstborn son, like we are doing today. A couple months ago when Brian and Stephanie Rockenseuss asked me if I would baptize their son Mason, on September 21st I thought, "Sure, why not." And later I looked at the text for today and I thought, "Oh no, what have I done?!" I mean baptism is a joyful day when family gathers around, pictures are taken, the child gets dressed up, water gets poured over his or her head, we all chuckle at the laughs or cries of the child and then go and have a nice lunch. I kept thinking to myself, "This is not the time to talk about a story like this." It kind of ruins our beautiful, sweet ritual of baptism when we talk about sacrifice and death and giving up one's only son.

And then I thought "Oh wait." I guess when you think about it like that, baptism is exactly the right time to talk about a story like this. Because surely this story of Abraham and Isaac is a reminder of the sacrifice of God's only Son, Jesus, for us. And baptism, as our Book of Order puts it, is our participating with Jesus in his death and resurrection. And also, of course, because of the fact that in baptism we are saying that this child is claimed by God, which means not only that he's loved by God, but also that we are called as followers of Christ, to die to ourselves and to live for him. And this means that there will be times when we're asked to do things we may not want to do or go places we may not want to go, but that we do so, whether we understand or not, because we trust in the God who did not hold back his own son, out of love for us.

Make no mistake about it, it takes courage and faith to have your child baptized into this sacrificial faith. Make no mistake about it, it takes courage and faith to keep

walking with God, even in the midst of questions that may not always be answered. But we do so, because we trust in a God whom we cannot see, but who we believe can see everything. Like Abraham, let us keep walking, knowing that God will provide. May it be so. Amen.