



New Day Church

Need a fresh start?

GOD COMES THROUGH

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On November 10th, 1942, Winston Churchill got up to speak at the Lord Mayor's luncheon in London. Britain had just won a big battle in North Africa, and Churchill said, "Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning."

That's a great line. I have no idea what that means in military terms, but it's a great line. And it applies perfectly to this morning. Since the start of the year, our theme has been "The Big Picture," and we have been taking lessons from the book of Genesis that show us more of the big picture of God – who he is and how we relate to him.

Today, I wouldn't say we're coming to the end of the big picture, but we're coming to the end of the beginning of this series. This morning we will pull one final story from Genesis before taking our leave from that book. Some of you may recall that it wasn't that long ago when we did a study on the life of Joseph, out of the end of Genesis, so although the book has much more to teach us, we'll move our study of the big picture to other texts for now.

Next week, we'll have another special interactive service, like we do every few months. If you haven't been here for one of these before, you won't want to miss it. After that, comes Palm Sunday and then it's Easter, so we've got a full month ahead of us.

But as we wrap up our time in Genesis, we're closing with one of the most powerful and moving sections of the entire book. When we last left Abraham, God had called him out of obscurity and taken him to the land of Canaan, where he promised to bless him. Abraham stepped out in faith and went where God called him, in spite of not knowing where that would lead.

Now we jump ahead. Many years have gone by, filled with many God encounters for Abraham. The biggest change in his life is that his wife, Sarah, miraculously gave birth to Isaac in her old age. Unbelievably, Abraham and Sarah finally had a baby together. Isaac was the child God had promised Abraham and was the delight of his life. It seems all the blessings God had predicted had finally come true. Life was good.

And then God calls Abraham's name once again. These events are written up by a master storyteller, so rather than read it for you this morning, I want to try and retell it in a way that the first listeners may have heard it.

TELL STORY

I find that story both beautiful and horrifying. It ends on such a high note of relief and God's blessing, but you have to go through the deepest valley to get there. How do we make sense of it? What are we supposed to take from it?

Let's go back and walk through the actual text a little more slowly and try to take in just what happened that day.

Genesis 22:1-18

Some time later God tested Abraham.

I'm so glad that the writer included that line right up front. When we know that what's about to happen is a test, it gives us a filter for understanding it.

I used to work with a client who was a vinyl window manufacturer. They wanted to make sure their windows would hold up in homes out in Palm Desert as well as homes in Anchorage. So they would test the vinyl in extreme conditions, boiling and baking the vinyl, freezing and thawing it to a degree it would never undergo in real life. The simulations were designed to maximize the stress on the vinyl and reveal how it would react in those environments.

Some tests are like that – maximizing the stress on us to see what we're really like. Abraham's test will push him to the extreme limits. It's under that kind of stress that his true nature will be revealed.

Do you feel God putting a squeeze on your life? Maybe you're not sure it's God, but you're feeling the squeeze any way. James says all the different kinds of stresses we face can be used by God, because they all shape or reveal our character.

Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied.

Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about."

What kind of a request is that? That can't be serious. Kill his own son? If somebody today said God had told him to do that, we'd cart him away to a padded room somewhere. That's crazy talk. Some religious nut who is mistaking demonic voices for God.

This goes far beyond giving up what you love for God. Many sermons have been preached on this story, pointing out our need to be willing to sacrifice everything to follow Christ. And that's certainly true in many respects. Jesus told the rich young ruler to go sell all his possessions if he wanted to follow him. I get that. We can become overly attached to things and even people, and sometimes we need to walk away to deepen our love of God.

But this is different. This is crossing a moral and ethical line. Parents are not supposed to kill their children. That goes against everything we know about being a good father. In talking about his own son, the poet Thomas Lynch said what I imagine must have been in Abraham's heart:

It hurts so bad that I cannot save him, protect him, keep him out of harm's way, shield him from pain. What good are fathers if not for these things?

Dads are supposed to give up themselves for their kids, not the other way around. What good will Abraham possibly be to God if he does something so morally reprehensible? He'll be murdering an innocent boy.

The request doesn't just go against fatherhood – it goes against everything we know about God. God's character is about life – not death. There was plenty of child sacrifice happening in the region back in those days, and God would say later how much he hated it. Besides, God was the one who had given Isaac to Abraham. Would he really be so cruel as to demand him back in this way? God could end Isaac's life at any time, and that would be difficult enough for Abraham. Why make him hold the knife and light the fire for a sacrifice?

Yes, God was asking Abraham to sacrifice something he loved. But it was far costlier than giving up smoking or chocolate. He was giving up his son, and in doing that he would be giving up his entire idea of how the world works. He would be intentionally destroying what he saw as his hope and future. There is no amount of rationalizing or thinking this one through that can make this request reasonable and logical. It is beyond human understanding.

I want to press that home, because we cannot move on to Abraham's response without pausing to take in how horrible, how dreadful this test really was. But he doesn't have to say anything for us to see this is pure agony. There is not a single other place in Scripture where God asks his people to do anything as impossible as this.

Abraham is faced with the ultimate paradox. He's asked by God to prove his love by being unloving. He's asked to show his obedience by violating the laws of life. He's asked to turn from a father to a father's worst enemy. He's asked to kill the very dream God had given him in the first place. You could not put someone in a more excruciating position.

There is no way for Abraham to wrap his mind around what God is asking. The request is too absurd. But I think that's the point. God has pushed Abraham into a corner where the only way out is for him to totally abandon himself to God.

Strip away all the blessings, strip away all God has given you and how you view yourself. Can you still love God just because of who he is? And can you trust his character when you don't understand his command? John Walton put it this way: "This is the type of test set before Abraham: Are you willing to follow God if there is nothing in it for you?"

There is no deeper crisis of faith. When life calls into question everything you thought you knew, can you still pin your hopes on a heavenly Father? When God baffles you, what do you do – cut and run or throw yourself on his mercy?

The singer, Nichole Nordeman, has a song called "Holy". She says in the chorus, "all you ever wanted...only me, on my knees saying, holy, holy." This is the uncomfortable but uncompromising truth. There are times in life where there is nothing more we can do but place our trust in God and his goodness in spite of what things look like around us.

Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance.

Those three days had to have been the heaviest of Abraham's life. He hadn't told anyone what he was planning to do. Certainly not Sarah – she would never have let him go. The servants didn't know and neither did Isaac. Abraham was alone in what one writer has called a "whirlpool of torment."

He had three days in which to change his mind and turn around, three days to realize the full implications of what he was doing. And as time went on, it may have started to seem unreal, like maybe God wouldn't show him a place after all. And then one day he looks up, and there it is in front of him. You can feel your heart sink at the thought of taking in that view. There's no more putting off the inevitable.

He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you."

Here's our first little glimmer of hope and how Abraham was even managing to function. He tells his servants, "WE will come back to you." Abraham seems to think Isaac will return with him.

What was going through his mind to get him to that place? Three passages of Scripture show why Abraham had a reason for hope. God had spoken to him on three separate occasions and made him some promises.

Genesis 15:3-5

And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir."

Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir."

So God had told Abraham he'd have a son who would be an heir, and an heir is usually someone who outlives you. A couple chapters later, God got even more specific.

Genesis 17:19

Then God said, "Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him."

There's nothing vague about that. Isaac's the chosen one, and he's going to have descendants.

Genesis 21:12

Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.

That comes just a few verses before our story this morning. So by the time God gives Abraham the assignment to kill Isaac, God's promises are already firmly rooted in his head.

When I was little, my dad built a swing set for us kids. It was a great swing, bigger than you'd normally find at a playground. Most backyard swing sets have kind of an A-frame support on the sides to keep them from tipping over. But this was built with just two thick posts sticking straight in the air on either end, with a single beam across the top. It looked like it was defying gravity. There was no way it should support us. But the secret to its stability was the fact that the posts went several feet under ground into concrete. The only thing that let us swing on it safely was the huge amount of support below the ground. And it was solid. We couldn't begin to swing high enough to tip it over.

It's the same with Abraham. The only way Abraham can do what God is asking is by clinging to God's promises that were already in place. They went down deep. They were solid. He couldn't do anything that would shake them loose. His freedom to do the unthinkable came from his complete faith in God's promises. He KNEW beyond a shadow of a doubt that even if he followed through and killed Isaac, it wasn't the end! God had already promised too much. And after all, Isaac's very existence was a miracle. God could certainly work a second one to bring him back. As the author of Hebrews put it,

Hebrews 11:19

Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead.

God's promises offer us freedom from fear. The more we trust that he's true to his word, the more willing we will be to step out in faith.

Are there promises you're needing to count on today? Psalm 145 says

Psalm 145:13

The LORD is faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made.

The only thing sure enough to support us in our times of testing is the word of God. His promises go down deep. His promise to us that he will never leave us. His promise that he is love. His promise that he will be our God. His promise that he is working for our good. His promise that he will save us. His promise that he will never let us go. His promise that he will take care of us. His promise to forgive. To heal. To know us. To teach us. To come back. To wipe away every tear. When nothing else makes sense, we lean on what we know cannot break. As much as we rock back and forth, the word of the Lord stands forever.

Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife.

What a picture – Isaac carrying the wood for his own funeral on his own shoulders. Walking along, completely trusting his dad.

As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?"

"Yes, my son?" Abraham replied.

"The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

Doesn't that just rip you up when you hear it? How Abraham kept it together, I'll never know.

Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together.

There's a quality to the relationship between Abraham and Isaac here that is much like the one between God and Abraham. Isaac is willingly going along with his father, and Abraham is only telling Isaac as much as he needs to know at the time. It is a journey of trust.

Corrie Ten Boom tells about being on the train with her father one time when she was ten. She had heard someone say a bad word and she asked her father what it meant. He looked at her, but didn't answer. Then he reached up and grabbed his suitcase and put it in front of her. He said "Will you carry that off the train for me?" It was very full, and she told him, "It's too heavy for me."

Her father said, "Yes. And it would be a pretty poor father who would ask his little girl to carry such a load. It's the same way, Corrie, with knowledge. Some knowledge is too heavy for children. When you are older and stronger you can bear it. For now you must trust me to carry it for you."

And Corrie writes, "I was satisfied. More than satisfied - wonderfully at peace. There were answers to this and all my hard questions - for now I was content to leave them in my father's keeping."

God protects us from knowing more than we need to. The most important thing to know is what Abraham told Isaac: God will provide. That is the second major theme of Abraham's life. He not only trusts God's promises, he trusts God's provision. Where Abraham needed strength, God would provide. Where he needed courage, God would provide. Where he needed some way out of this situation, God would provide.

God will never take us into something, God will never ask anything of us where he isn't able to provide the power, the resources or the solution.

When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied.

"Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."

Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided."

The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."

The philosopher Soren Kierkegaard was transfixed by this story. He devoted an entire book to it, exploring all the different ramifications of what it says. He wrote,

Abraham I cannot understand. In a certain sense there is nothing I can learn from him but astonishment.

Astonishment is a good word. I'd like to say I have the perfect three point outline of what we're supposed to take away from this event, or seven practical steps for us to follow. And you could probably find them in there. But I think God may want us to quit trying to analyze the passage and just be astonished by it.

I'm astonished by the request.

And we need to be perplexed by this hard choice. We need to agonize with Abraham over his choice, to find it as impossible as he did. We need a dilemma that drops us to our knees where all we can say is, "Holy is the Lord."

Stacey Padrick writes, "Even though our questions remain unanswered; even though we wrestle with the mysteries of suffering, darkness, pain, unfulfillment, brokenness...God is with us. He reaches out and embraces us. Holds us. Comforts us. It's going to be okay, for its not so much answers we really need – it's God himself."

A request so astonishing makes us lean further into God. I'm also astonished by Abraham's response. He didn't hesitate to trust and obey, and what he did inspires and humbles us. It's clear why he is the father of faith, because he modeled it so completely in this story.

He modeled something else that's even more astonishing. He gave us a picture of God's agony. I need Abraham for that. If I didn't have a human picture that is so easy to connect with emotionally, I might not appreciate what God the Father went through with the sacrifice of his own son. His predicament was that shockingly, horribly difficult. The cost to him was unspeakable. It was a total paradox how a perfect, sinless God could become sin, or how an immortal God could die. He had to become the opposite of what he was, just like Abraham did.

Listen, if the gospel is no longer fresh to you, if it's something you've heard so often that it's lost its impact, maybe you need to hear it through Abraham. Maybe you need to reconnect with the incredible depth of love and strength it took to send Jesus. This story restores that astonishment for me.

Isaac is astonishing in it to, just for his participation. What a picture of Jesus. When he walked along with that wood on his back, like Jesus carried his cross. His acceptance of his father's will. Like Jesus, he didn't open his mouth to protest or try to run away, he trusted his dad so much, because he knew how much his dad loved him. At Jesus' baptism, God used almost the same exact words he had used to describe Isaac's relationship to Abraham. "This is my son, whom I love." The father-son bond went both ways.

Mostly, I'm astonished to think of God's solution – not just in providing a ram, but by really being the substitute for Isaac himself. It was through Isaac's family that Jesus would be born and ultimately bring salvation. On the mountain of the Lord, it will be

provided. On Calvary's mountain, it has been provided. In Hebrew, God's name here is Yahweh Jireh – God will provide. God will see to it. God will come through.

Are you needing God to come through for you today? In just a few moments we will be celebrating the Lord's Supper together and remembering what Jesus did for us. Paul wrote and said, "My God will supply all your needs in Christ Jesus." He is still Yahweh Jireh. And he is still ready to astonish us.