

“Is That All There Is?”

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

20 June 2021

Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Texts: Genesis 22:1-14

Mark 4:35-41

*“Abraham said, ‘God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son.’
So the two of them walked on together.”*

- Genesis 22:8

Prayer

Spirit of the Living God

Surround all of us,

**both those who are gathered in-person
as well as those who are joining us on Facebook,**

With your love and grace.

Open our hearts to your Word proclaimed.

May the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you.

In the name of Jesus Christ, we make this prayer. Amen.

Last week, one of our church members asked me if today’s service would be as fun and creative as the Family Ministries service on June 6th. What she really wanted to know was whether I would go down the slide one more time before we resume our indoor services. I told her that while I could not promise that this morning would be as lively since Charlotte and the children are not leading the service, the biblical texts alone would make for quite an interesting and adventurous worship service on Father’s Day.

I wasn’t kidding!

Since my ordination 20 years ago, I have avoided preaching on the story of Abraham and Isaac that Andrew read a few minutes ago. The almost sacrifice of Isaac by his own elderly father is one of the many passages in the Bible that feminist biblical scholar Phyllis Trible described as texts of terror. And the fourteen verses in this story do terrify me. Quite honestly, I wish they were not in the Bible. At the very least, as Old Testament professor Matthew Schlimm suggested, texts like the sacrifice of Isaac should be **“labeled *“hazardous materials”* and handled with utmost care. We should neither carelessly throw [these stories] away nor insist that they’re harmless. Instead, we should recognize the danger in trying to incorporate them into our daily lives.”**¹

For centuries, Jews, Christians and Muslims have tried to make sense of both the human and the divine violence that are woven into the foundational stories of our faith traditions. All three Abrahamic religions agree that Abraham is the father of all

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believers and the paradigm of the man of faith who when tested holds absolutely nothing back to prove his love for God. However, the tendency among the three faith traditions has been to downplay the troubling aspects of this morning's story to make it cleaner and neater. There is a persistent reluctance to face and wrestle with the theological, moral, and ethical complications and implications of Abraham's willingness to follow through with God's command to offer his son Isaac as a burnt offering.

The rabbinic tradition describes Isaac, not as a child, but as a brave man in his mid-thirties who is fully aware of God's command and willingly accepts his role as the human offering. In fact, some rabbinic collections claim that Isaac carried the wood upon which he would be sacrificed without any resistance and begged his father to bind him, so he wouldn't struggle and run away. But in Judaism, the focus of the story is not so much on God's awful command or on Abraham's unwavering obedience, but on God's mercy. At the last minute, God stays Abraham's hand and gives Isaac a future. Abraham's obedience pays off. God will forever remember the binding of Isaac and will show kindness and mercy to Abraham's descendants.²

In Islam, it is not clear who Abraham takes to Mount Moriah where the ram is eventually sacrificed and where Solomon will one day build the Temple. Like Christians and Jews, Muslims also tend to overlook the violence in this text and favor a more generous reading of the story. What matters here, Muslim scholars insist, is Abraham's faith, which allows him to trust God unquestioningly and offer God his whole-hearted obedience. By not mentioning Isaac's name, the Quran leaves the possibility open for Ishmael, Abraham's son with Hagar, to be the child of the promise who survives and becomes a blessing to the nations.

For two millennia, Christians have praised Abraham for his willingness to sacrifice his greatest hopes, most cherished dreams and even those he loved to be faithful to God. If you remember your Sunday school classes you know that Abraham walked away from the safety of his clan and dragged Sarah miles away from their country, putting their lives at risk time and over again because God commanded him to go to a land he had never seen and Abraham believed in God's call.³ Against all odds, he held on to his faith in God's promise that he would be the father of a great nation even though for most of their married life Sarah was unable to bear children of her own. When Sarah finally gave birth to Isaac and demanded that Ishmael, Abraham's firstborn son, and his mother Hagar be thrown out, Abraham hesitated only to be instructed by God to go along with Sarah's demand.⁴ The book of Genesis says that Abraham rose early in the morning, took some bread and a skin of water, put everything on Hagar's shoulder and sent her and Ishmael away into the wilderness where mother and child almost died.⁵ Now, after waiting for almost 30 long years for God to fulfill the promise, the unthinkable happens. Even though Abraham had been stubbornly faithful to God, often allowing his obedience to God to override what he knew to be morally and ethically right, God decides to check if the old man's money is truly where his mouth is. Without any warning or any good reason, God tests Abraham's faith in the cruelest and most horrifying manner. God asks Abraham to travel with Isaac for three days to Mount

Moriah where Abraham will have to personally tie up his son's hands and feet, slit his throat and offer his body in a religious ritual meant to show God the depth of his faith and devotion. And Abraham, the same man who dared to go head-to-head with God in a desperate effort to spare the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah from divine judgment and destruction,⁶ does not utter one single word on behalf of his own son. In the song "*Highway 61 Revisited*," Bob Dylan imagines a brief conversation between Abraham and God that goes like this: "**Oh God said to Abraham, 'Kill me a son.' Abe says, 'Man, you must be puttin' me on. 'God say, 'No.' Abe say, 'What?'**"⁷ In Genesis, Abraham remains silent and shows no emotion. He cuts the wood, saddles the donkey, takes two servant boys along and departs to Mount Moriah. There, Abraham carries out the divine command with purposeful determination. He builds an altar, lays the wood "***in order***," binds Isaac, places his son on top of the wood and draws the knife to sacrifice the child he loves and to put an end to the promise God made to bless all the families of the earth through his faith and through his descendants.⁸ And in that horrifying moment, when Abraham raises his hand and everything seems to be lost, the angel of the Lord stops him. God provides a ram caught in the thicket by its horns for the sacrifice. Isaac is spared.

This is an appalling and difficult story. Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard was so shocked by these 14 verses in Genesis that he could not imagine any sane, reasonable, faithful and loving father ever entertaining the possibility of taking things as far as Abraham did. Thanks be to God, none of us can. None of us believe that God expects us to show our devotion through acts of violence or animal cruelty.

In his book "*Fear and Trembling*," Kierkegaard wonders how the same preacher who extols the virtues of Abraham from the pulpit without the slightest discomfort would react if one of the fathers in the pews said that God had ordered him to sacrifice a child. There is no question, Kierkegaard argued, that the same preacher would say emphatically that Abraham's are not the footsteps for us to follow. And the only response to such a man would be either the notion that he is a madman or criminal, or, more likely, a dangerous religious fanatic that is tragically deluded about the meaning of the biblical story.⁹

Phyllis Tribble said that the biblical stories of terror seldom offer satisfactory endings, but they do create the opportunity for new beginnings.¹⁰ Kierkegaard retold the Genesis account of the near sacrifice of Isaac several times, each time making changes to the structure and the details in the story, hoping that he might get a glimpse of the deeper, richer, and even novel meaning between the story's terrifying lines. In one version of the story, Kierkegaard imagined Abraham on Mount Moriah turning away from Isaac for a moment, "***but when Isaac saw Abraham's face a second time it was changed, his gaze was wild, his whole being was sheer terror. He grabbed Isaac by the chest, threw him to the ground, and said, 'Stupid boy, do you think I am your father?... Do you think it is God's command? No, it is my desire.'*** ***Then Isaac trembled and cried out in his anguish: 'God of heaven, have mercy on me, God of Abraham, have mercy on me; if I have no father on earth, then you be***

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my father!’ But Abraham said softly to himself, ‘Lord God in Heaven, I thank you; it is better that he believes me a monster than that he should lose faith in you.’”¹¹

Child sacrifice demanded by God is an unsavory topic on any Sunday, but it is a particularly complicated passage to use as the sermon text on Father’s Day. I am sure that wiser preachers are either following today’s lectionary or have chosen a less problematic passage to reflect on and celebrate the gift of fatherhood. I selected the story of Isaac’s survival because, like in Kierkegaard’s version of what went down on Mount Moriah, I believe that while Abraham may have passed the test of faith, he failed the test as a father.

There is no question in my mind that Abraham was in indescribable emotional and spiritual distress while he traveled with Isaac to Mount Moriah. The biblical narrative does not say anything about Abraham’s feelings or state of mind, but we can imagine the anguish that this father must have felt at the beginning of each one of the three days of the journey. His feet probably felt heavier the closer they got to the place of sacrifice. It must have been unbelievably difficult for Abraham to take those last few steps up the mount alone with his son, holding in his hands the deadly elements of knife and fire. When Isaac asked him, ***“Father! The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering?”*** I wonder if rather than making a bold statement of faith - ***“God will provide,”*** Abraham felt like hugging his son and opening up to him about his pain, his internal struggle with God’s command, and his doubt about whether or not he was doing the right thing.

A couple of weeks ago, I asked a few fathers in our congregation to send me a short reflection on how their faith has shaped their role as fathers. Mac Reid wrote back and said that while faith is an intangible concept, as a father he has tried to share his faith with Kim and Kerry through his actions without being “preachy” or forcing on them his own experience of God. Then Mac wrote, ***“I am not a perfect father, but I believe that “doing the right thing” is what God wants us to do. We don’t need to know all of God’s laws and Jesus’s teachings to understand that ‘doing the right thing’ would be pleasing in God’s eyes.”***

The story of Isaac’s survival validates Abraham’s faith that God would provide a way out of the nightmare that he was dragging his son into. It is possible that Abraham knew without the shadow of a doubt that by obeying the divine command, Isaac would go on living as a blessing to all the nations and families of the earth. God’s promise to him would be fulfilled through Isaac even if, as Kierkegaard imagined in his version of the story, Isaac never understood how his own father chose obedience to God over his life. I can’t help but wonder though if Abraham passes the test of faith and fails the test as a father because he did not know how to share his love for God with Isaac and his blind faith ended up damaging his relationship with his son.

In the story, Abraham remains faithful to God’s command but emotionally distant from Isaac. They walk together, but Abraham does not speak to his son about the

burden he is carrying. He is reluctant to be vulnerable in front of Isaac. Abraham believes that his role as father is to make the difficult choices for his family alone. He makes all the preparations for the trip without ever giving Isaac a chance to weigh in on his decision to sacrifice Isaac's life and their family's future. Even though he loves his son, Abraham's actions contradict what is in his heart. He pushes his religious beliefs on his son rather than teaching Isaac to trust God. Abraham passes the religious test but fails as a father because the only right thing for a father to do is to protect his children, love them, offer them a future, teach them that it is hard to make the right choices but that you will always be closer to God if you are brave enough to choose what is good and right. Abraham failed as a father because he did not try hard enough to show Isaac that life is sacred; that life is worth fighting for even if you have to go against long-held religious beliefs, practices and traditions that you cherished all your life.

Hearing what I am about to say may come as a surprise to many of you, but the truth is that Abraham is not alone in his failure to pass the test of fatherhood. Honestly, the Bible is not the best place to look for fathers as role models. Our Holy Scriptures are filled with stories of men who struggled to be good fathers and quite often failed.

At this point, I am sure you are feeling tempted to turn to the words of the famous song by Peggy Lee and ask: "***Is that all there is?***"¹² Is parental failure all that there is to the story of the near sacrifice of Isaac? Is there anything else in this story? Is there good news in this passage at all?

Of course, there is a whole lot more to this story, otherwise Walter Brueggemann, one of the most respected First Testament scholars in the world, would not have defined it as the most theologically demanding story in the Abraham tradition."¹³ But on this Father's Day, what I would like to point out is that Abraham's failure to pass the test of fatherhood is actually good news to all of us. Fatherhood is a beautiful gift, albeit a very demanding one. It is life-giving and draining, rewarding and difficult, uplifting and heartbreaking, fun and stressful, sacred and mundane all at the same time.

There are wonderful moments in the life of a father. Alan Hart, one of the fathers in our church, shared a sweet story with me. His daughter sent him a card that shows a bird couple in a tree sending their fledgling out. The card reads: "***The mother bird sends the baby bird out into the world. The father bird slips them an extra twenty, just in case.***" Alan said that the message in the card points to an important thing in a father's relationship with his children, which is a deep closeness, the willingness to be there for your children while they chart their own course in the world.

Being a father comes with colossal expectations and like Abraham and so many other fathers in the Bible, every father wants to be close to his children and will often slip them an extra twenty when their kids take off to face the world on their own; but fathers will always be imperfect creatures who are bound to disappoint and even break

their children's hearts on occasions. Abraham came down from Mount Moriah by himself and returned home alone.¹⁴ Genesis does not say what happened to Isaac after his traumatic experience on the mount, but I wonder if father and son needed some time apart to heal before they could be together again as a family.

Some mistakes are harder to forget and forgive than others. What is amazing in the story of Isaac and Abraham is that God continues to work in and through the lives of men like Abraham who do not always make the right choice and too often fail to be a role model as a father. Better yet, our faith reassures us that even in the most difficult moments when we feel as if we were facing the challenging days of fatherhood alone, Christ is with us. God the Father refuses to give up on any one of us. Like a loving father, God empowers us to get through the choppy waters and violent storms of fatherhood with faith and hope that we will have another day, another chance to keep trying to be better fathers.

I was tempted to give a different title to this morning's sermon – "Dads get lice too." One of my colleagues, Matt Fitzgerald who serves as a UCC minister in Chicago, wrote a piece for the Christian Century about the time his children were exposed to head lice at school. Embarrassed, Matt took his kids to a salon near their home specialized in nit-picking. Trying to make himself feel a little more comfortable in a very uncomfortable situation for him, Matt made a joke. Pointing to his bald head he told the salon receptionist, "***I hope I don't have them too.***" He replied, "***Don't worry. Dads never get lice. Moms do.***" The receptionist pointed toward a few women, sitting patiently as the nitpickers did their work. Puzzled Matt asked, "***Why not dads?***" The man answered, "***Moms get down on the floor to play, or the kids get in their laps to cuddle. Their heads touch. The lice climb in.***" Matt closes the article with a practical tip to fathers: "***if you are a dad to small children, you should try to catch head lice.***"¹⁵

Fathers, you are a blessing. Thank you for keeping on trying to be our dads despite all the challenges and failures. Thank you for not being perfect but for doing your very best to protect your children, to love them, and to teach them to love God by doing what is right. Thank you for sharing your faith, as fragile as you may think your faith is, with your family, but especially with your kids. Remember that you are not alone when being a father gets hard, God is with you, and you also have a faith community here at ACC ready to embrace you and walk along with you and your family. May you always be strong enough to get down to be with you children, to be emotionally available to them, to voice your love, name your fears, speak about your dreams for their future, teach them that life is worth living at all times, even during the tough times, and always, always make time in your life to be close to your children, to cuddle with them even if that means that you will catch head lice.

Happy Father's Day.

¹ By Matthew Schlimm in Violent Texts: Why is Deuteronomy 20 in the Bible?, Christian Century, p. 24, 30 June 2021.

² See Genesis 22:15-18.

³ Genesis 12:1.

⁴ Genesis 21:9-10.

⁵ Genesis 21:14.

⁶ Genesis 18:16-33.

⁷ By Bob Dylan, Highway 61revisited, 1965.

⁸ Genesis 12:2-3; Genesis 22:15-18.

⁹ Søren Kierkegaard in Fear and Trembling, pp. 56-57 [Kindle edition].

¹⁰ Phyllis Trible in Texts of Terror, p.2.

¹¹ Søren Kierkegaard in Fear and Trembling, p. 42 [Kindle edition]

¹² Songwriters: Leiber Jerry and Stoller Mike. By Peggy Lee, Is That All There is?, 1969.

¹³ Walter Brueggemann in Interpretation: Genesis, p. 185.

¹⁴ Genesis 22:19.

¹⁵ By Matt Fitzgerald in God the Original Parent, Christian Century, p. 32, 30 June 2021.