



# A SERMON

by Rev. Joann H. Lee: September 14, 2025



The Angel spares Abraham from sacrificing his son Isaac.  
Engraving for the Bible, Germany, 1860 (Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld)

## ON THE ALTAR OF RELIGION

### Genesis 21:1-3; 22:1-14

*The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him.*

*After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you." So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw*

*the place far away. Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you." Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together.*

*When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place "The Lord will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided."*

AS WE GRAPPLE WITH THIS STORY OF THE ANCESTORS OF OUR FAITH, I'm reminded of all the ways we still in the year 2025, continue to sacrifice our children on the altars of religion, politics, or even the second amendment.

It's been a particularly heavy week, month? or year? And the scourge of gun violence continues to take our children, as well as political pundits and leaders. I've wanted to hide under my covers a whole lot this week.

But on Thursday night, I came to Calvary, with all three kids in tow, and I expected to hear the wisdom of Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor which did happen; she did share much wisdom. But what really surprised me was the generosity of her time, and the kindness with which she treated each child.

It reminded of someone we talk a whole lot about here, that Jesus, who once said, "Let the children come unto me." Justice Sotomayor literally let the children come to her, hug her, and ask her questions, questions ranging from the Supreme Court to whether pineapple belongs on pizza.

And a part of me worried about how much time she gave to the kids—like, this is not why over 800 people showed up tonight. But that's just it. We serve a God who shows up in unexpected ways, surprising us with loving kindness and generosity. And I've got to admit, since Thursday night,

I've had a little more hope, and a little more faith that goodness can indeed prevail, though it may not look like what I expect.

So, let's be on the lookout for how God shows up today.

THE NAME "ISAAC" MEANS LAUGHTER OR TO LAUGH. And it references how Sarah, when she heard she would give birth to a child, laughed because it seemed so impossible. She had spent all of her child-bearing days barren, and then, in her advanced age, Isaac was born. It was a miracle! And it was a promise finally fulfilled by God.

After my first child was born, I walked around in a sleepless haze for nearly 2 months. I hardly knew when it was day or when it was night; I could hardly tell right from left; or up from down.

The one thing I did know, however, was that I loved this child so darn much. I spent hours just staring at his little face, in love with every little eyelash, and curve of his nose. I adored him.

So, I can't help but wonder, as I read this story, what Sarah knew about this trip. How much did Abraham reveal to his wife about the purpose of this outing?

Because let me tell you, if it were me, there's no way. Absolutely not. I don't care what you think God has said. It is not happening.

And I think most of you would agree with me, be it your child or someone else's. It's absurd, the sacrifice of a child? Just no.

But that's how this story has been read for a very long time. God, commanding the sacrifice of Isaac as a test for his father Abraham. And Abraham willingly leading Isaac to his death.

It is violent and cruel; transactional in the very worst way. And people who love God and want so much to be faithful, rightfully cringe and struggle with this passage.

Rachel Held Evans, who was known for deconstructing her evangelical faith and writing about it, considered this story on her blog back in 2014, *before* she became a mother and before she died much too young.

She wrote this:

I am not yet a mother, and still I know, deep in my gut,  
that I would sooner turn my back on everything I know to be true  
than sacrifice my child on the altar of religion.  
Maybe the real test isn't in whether you drive the knife through the heart.  
Maybe the real test is in whether you refuse.<sup>1</sup>

It's something to think about, isn't it? A brave question, grappling with scripture.

She then reflects on the parents who choose to leave the exclusive and non-affirming church they knew and loved, in order to support their child who came out as LGBTQIA. These parents refused to continue attending and supporting the institution that told them to hate or reject their child for the sake of God. Evans affirms that these parents' unwillingness to betray their child on the altar of their religion is a testament of their love and faithfulness to God, *not* the other way around.

I was surprised to find that there are, in fact, some Jewish writings and commentary that support her theory that Abraham actually *failed* the test because he should have refused - choosing love and life over duty and ritual sacrifice.

And to be frank, I can see God *pleading* for Isaac's life a lot more than I can see God *demanding* Isaac's life. But, according to history, child sacrifice was not an uncommon practice back then. There was a time when it was just a part of religious ritual; what the fickle gods asked of the people.

For Abraham, sacrificing his child was not a *moral* question—he had other questions, but it wasn't about whether this was allowed or okay because in his day, it's just what the gods asked of their devotees sometimes. The Canaanites, the Babylonians, the Phoenicians, even the ancient Greeks and Romans have accounts of child sacrifice in order to appease the gods and receive good fortune.

But Rob Bell and some biblical scholars wonder if *this* story was the tide turning on a world that once normalized child sacrifice to a world that now finds it, mostly, reprehensible, at least as a religious ritual.

One person opines, "I personally find convincing the theory that the story of Abraham almost sacrificing Isaac is a story about the *end* of child sacrifice. Perhaps the beginning of a culture, beginning to wrestle with this ancient practice, and define a response."

And the reality is culture *did* shift. In most faith traditions and civilizations today, the practice of human sacrifice, child or otherwise, is obsolete.

And you'll find that in several Renaissance paintings and art, like the one found on your bulletin this morning, the focus is often *not* of the *binding* or sacrifice of Isaac but of the angel, telling Abraham to STOP, and providing a ram to sacrifice in his stead.

Of course, we now know when we read it today, that this was God's plan all along, God never intended Isaac to die. But did Abraham know this?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/fail-abraham-test>

In chapter 22, verses 4-5, scripture says: "On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. Then Abraham said to his young men, (who were making the journey with them) 'Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then **we** will come back to you.'"

That use of the first-person plural: "we" indicates that he perhaps expected them *both* to return. And while there's a lot that the story doesn't tell us, I think maybe Abraham held two seemingly contradicting realities in his heart.

One was that he was to give Isaac up as an offering to God. The other was that God's promise could be trusted, that through Isaac, Abraham would be the father of many generations to come.

How those two things went together, Abraham did not yet know. But he trusted God, anyway. And faith is not acting with certainty; faith is acting when the way is not clear.

Hebrews 11 is a chapter about faith, and *this* story shows up in it. Verse 17 says, "By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom he had been told, 'It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you.' He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead- and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back."

Now again, we don't exactly know what Abraham was thinking, what he hoped for, or what he thought would be possible. But reading this story today, I see someone stepping out in faith, trying to believe that two things might be true at the same time, and that perhaps God is able to provide a way when there seems to be no probable way.

Abraham did not know how. But Abraham believed God could.

Today, we have a minute for ministry from Jett Appling of SafeHouse. And then, following worship, we have an Adult Education Presentation in the lounge also from SafeHouse. I hope you'll join us.

The Rev. Glenda Hope who began this incredible ministry of Safe House, once spoke with our young adults group. She said, and I paraphrase, that we, as humans, like to have all the things planned out before we start something. We wanna know all the possible outcomes, the possible pitfalls, and how to do it.

To that, she said, "You don't have to know. You don't have to have a long-range plan.

You don't have to know even what you're doing. When God speaks to you, just go."

When she began Safe House, she didn't have all the answers. She just knew that she was called to a ministry in the Tenderloin, which did not seem probable or possible with her former church experiences, but it evolved and it grew and it got funding. And it evolved and it grew, and it eventually became what it is today.

She did not have all the answers. She did not have a full-proof plan. But she did have faith.

It reminds me of the quote by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr: "Take the first step in faith. You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step."

And so I imagine, Abraham, telling those who've traveled with them, "We'll be back, both of us, me *and* Isaac," and not quite knowing *how* that will happen, he ventures forth any way.

These days, I find myself in *that* particular moment of the story quite often.

I don't know how we will go from a nation that worships guns to a nation that prevents school shootings. I don't know how we will go from a culture that scapegoats trans people and immigrants to a culture that offers life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to all people, equally, like we say we do. I don't know how this country will ever escape the sins of slavery so that we might delight in diversity and repair the harms done to our black siblings.

And in the year 2025, if we're honest with ourselves, we continue to sacrifice our children, not on a mountaintop like Abraham planned for Isaac, but by refusing to change gun laws, by denying gender-affirming care, and by protecting pedophiles and sexual predators. I don't know how we go from sacrificing children to loving and nurturing them. How do we get from one place to another? Or maybe it's not even a linear process because things *can* and *do* co-exist, creating seemingly contradicting realities.

After all, even in *this* broken and divided country, willing to sacrifice our children, I witnessed a judge of the highest court in this nation, lovingly and with great kindness and care, hug and respect every child in this sanctuary on Thursday night.

We are a nation that allows students to practice active shooter drills rather than address our gun laws. *And* we are a nation with a supreme court judge who loves and honors children with all her heart.

*Both* of these are true, and *both* of these realities exist at the very same time. And I don't quite know how to reconcile it all.

So here's what I do know. I do know and do believe that my ancestors in faith probably grappled with this same not-knowing, with this same conundrum of contradicting truths existing at the same time.

And if Abraham was surprised with an unexpected ram for sacrifice, and was able to proclaim later that "The Lord will provide," then, perhaps we, too, might find God in unexpected places and in unexpected ways, able to proclaim, one day, that the Lord did indeed provide.

Is there an angel, or a ram, or a voice calling us to notice something that might allow us to believe in the impossible, that allows us to see and create a way where there is no way? I hope so.

Because I have to believe that transformation is possible. I have to believe that people and cultures and societies can and do change, allowing for love, peace, and justice to thrive.

Maybe sometimes we revert back, but it will not always be this way. Because we have a God who once said: "No—this is not the way. We will not sacrifice humans on the altar of religion this day." And we have a God that says today, "No—this is not the way. We will not continue to sacrifice humans on *any* altar this day." And we have a God who, in the person of Jesus, resisted the violence of Rome and chose to radically love and welcome all people.

Friends, we do not have to live like this. Change is not only possible; it is necessary because God demands it. And God will provide a way. I imagine it will not be easy. But I have to believe it is possible.

Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief. Amen.