

Covenant Word

End of Innocence

The title is taken from a Bruce Hornsby song by the same title.

Genesis 22:1-14; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42

*A Message by
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Pastor
Sunday
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I have it on good authority that in Sunday School last week a comment was made that I have been selective these last couple of Sundays by telling only the stories of Sarah and Hagar, while ignoring Abraham! So today, my friends, your dreams have come true: it is all about Abraham. Abraham who gave his wife, Sarah, over not just once but twice to an Egyptian pharaoh in order to save his own skin. Today it is all about old, decrepit Abraham who went in to young, voluptuous Hagar without hesitation. Today it is all about Abraham who endures Sarah's complaints and demands without one question, without one complaint, without the least bit of backbone evidenced. While the writer of Hebrews may call Abraham "Mr. Faithfulness," I think I will just call him "crazy ol' Abraham."

Bruce Feiler in his book *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths* says of Abraham: (Taken from John Buchanan's sermon, "Unforgettable," Fourth Presbyterian Church, July 10, 2005)

There is no Michelangelo's statue that everyone can envision, as there is of David; no indelibly outstretched fingers in the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, as there are for Adam. Joseph earned an Andrew Lloyd Webber musical as well as a home video starring Donny Osmond. Moses merits a Cecil B. DeMille epic [film] and a Dream Works animated blockbuster. Steven Spielberg and Harrison Ford spent an entire film looking for the lost Ark of the Covenant. But no Abraham. (pp. 69-70)

These past Sundays we have been looking at the grand super highway of Abraham's story: the call from God, the blessing that comes with it, the promise of a son, and, at long last, the delivery of a son. Today's story, however, will

recognize that the blessing of God brings a cost with it. In fact, as that super highway of Abraham's life keeps being built, we find that it takes the sacrifice of a great many people in order to keep Abraham in the victory lane as the great patriarch. In today's text, Abraham reminds me of that driver who says, "I never have road accidents, but I see a good many wrecks in my rear view mirror." (Samuel Wells, "Casualties of Destiny," Easter, 2009, Journal for Preachers)

Isaac is told that he is going on a trip with his father. Can you imagine his excitement over having Abraham all to himself, of leaving momma behind and just being "boys" together? Would they take their fishing poles or their bows and arrows? Would they cook over the open fire and tell stories under the stars? Would they pitch a tent and rest in sleeping bags? In his wildest imaginings, Isaac could not envision the events he is getting ready to experience with his father.

No doubt, Abraham does not sleep well either that night before their departure. His dreamless state, however, has more to do with dread than with excitement, for you see, Abraham knows

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what this trip is about. God has instructing Abraham to take his son, his only son whom he loves, and go to Mt. Moriah in order to offer Isaac as a burnt offering sacrifice. Wow! Really? We have endured all this family drama focused on the inability to have a son, now to only have the son snatched away?

You note that Sarah is not consulted about this new request from God. She is nowhere in the text and rightly so, because Sarah, the mother of nations, would have done everything within her manipulative power to keep this boy-trip from happening. So Abraham is alone. He is alone in his dread, and he is alone in his shock. If nothing else, he is panicked about coming home to Sarah and admitting that he sacrificed their son at God's request. All laughter would cease then and forever more. They would never recover.

Now, this story appears front and center in Genesis. Only 22 chapters in, no reader of the Bible can miss it. I even wonder why we continue after reading it. The opening statement, "God tested Abraham," sounds like

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for
wanting to read and
study these thoughts
more carefully.
Please know that I do
not take full credit for
anything that may be
contained within,
because I may have
read or heard
something at some
point during my
pilgrimage and do not
remember its source
and thus, cannot give
the rightful author
his/her credit. I pray
that you will find
inspiration and
encouragement.**



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Worship with us each Sunday
morning at 9 a.m. and for Bible
study at 10:30 a.m.

The Emergency Broadcast System interrupting our favorite TV show. With that harsh, grating tone, we hear announced "This is a test!" This opening sentence interrupts and demands that attention be given to Abraham, who after all he has been through, is now receiving a test by God. It is a test as to whether Abraham will totally commit his life to the call that God has extended. It is a test as to whether God's promises can be trusted in the most harrowing of life's experiences.

It is a test to see if even when innocence is snatched away, we will endure in faithfulness. And so devoted Abraham journeys to Mount Moriah with Isaac. He prepares a place of sacrifice and lays his son on it. His only son, beloved Isaac, the child through whom alone the call and promise has reality, is to be given up in sacrifice leaving Abraham only with God. (James Mays, "Now I Know," Theology Today) This test will determine whether Abraham trusts and obeys God or only adores the gift. (Melinda Hinners, "Close Call," The Christian Century, June 5-12, 2002)

With an ever so slight shift, we realize that this story is not really about Abraham or Isaac. It is about God. Unfortunately, there is little here to suggest that God is nice and polite; little to support our desire to make God into that gentle uncle or wise grandfather; little here to make God into our own image. Instead, we encounter a God who has to be sure that we can be counted on; that when the waters are rough and God's integrity is at risk, that we will have enough courage to pull through with the little bit of faithfulness we can muster at that moment. At those times, God says "Take what you love most, what you care about the most, the very thing in which your hopes and dreams are tied and turn it loose." (Sam Lloyd, "Give it Up," June 27, 1999, The National Cathedral)

"What's happening here," says Thomas Cahill (The Gifts of the Jews) "is the emergence of an idea of God who is one,

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who is the creator and provider. A God who comes down to engage people, to talk to them, to give orders, but also to share hopes and dreams. A God who understands and participates in human love and passion and grief and faith. This is a living God; a God far greater than statues and amulets and good luck charms. This is a God not always manageable, not always understandable, but a God who can be counted on to be present and involved in human life, a God who in an ultimate way can be trusted with our lives and the lives of our dear ones. This is a very different God...this is the only God that counts."

And so Abraham takes the only evidence he has that God is acting on the promise of generations and trudges up the

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side of Mt. Moriah. My heart breaks as Isaac's question echoes off the pages. "But father, where is the lamb?" he asks after watching the sacrificial bier be built. The reality slowly dawns that he is the sacrifice. And with that realization, his innocence vanishes. He will never see his father in the same way again, and I venture to guess that neither Abraham nor Isaac will ever view God in the same way either!

While this story feels removed from our sophistication, I wonder: Isn't our innocence lost over and over again? When Adam and Eve leave the Garden in disgrace over their disobedience, don't we recognize their facial expressions? Aren't they the same as Isaac's and Abraham's as they deal with a God whose expectation is extreme? This God not only demands sacrifice, this God allows tragedy in order to know, for sure, that our commitment is secure. And so we watch one another and realize the loss of innocence each time a child is the brunt of his/her parents' physical and emotional abuse; each time we turn to substances to fill a void in our emotional and spiritual system; each time a spouse forfeits years of trust building for infidelity; each time violence escalates out of control; each time we put personal integrity at risk to keep a job or to keep a friend or to save face; each time we stand at the grave only to realize the enormous loss of potential in unfinished hopes and dreams.

Innocence ends when the reality hits that we are the sacrifice. It is at that point and time in our faith journey when we come to grips with the reality that God demands sacrifice; God allows tragedy; and yet this same God can be trusted as provider...even as Abraham is provided with a ram for sacrifice instead of Isaac. We know that we can trust God to provide, because God is also a father who lays His only son, his son whom He loved, on a altar. It is what we remember when we come to this table, for Jesus' test was crucifixion and God's providing was the resurrection ... all for our sakes.