

## ***We Obey, God Provides***

Genesis 22:1-14

June 29, 2008

### **I.**

Several years ago, on New Year's Day, an elaborate float in the Tournament of Roses Parade suddenly sputtered and quit. It was out of gas. The entire parade was held up while someone got a can of gas. The irony was that the float was entered by the Mobil Oil Company. With all of its oil resources, and all of its gas stations throughout the country, its own float was out of gas on national television. The point here is that someone was not paying attention to the basics.

Today I'm going to discuss the reading we heard about Abraham and Isaac from the Book of Genesis. This story also deals with the basics. It's one of the most important parts of the Old Testament, and it also shows why the Old Testament still is important to us today.

A few weeks ago I asked us to imagine we were watching a movie about how Matthew became a disciple. Today's reading from Genesis lends itself to the same idea. Imagine something like this.

A camera pans across the landscape; the silence punctuated only by the soft unceasing wind. A subtitle "*Canaan, 1842 B.C.*" appears briefly at the bottom of the screen. The camera focuses on an old man dozing at the entrance of a tent. Livestock and other living things move aimlessly in the shimmering heat. Without warning a voice from heaven pierces the air, "Abraham!"

This reading resembles a script by Stanley Kubrick. Remember him? *Clockwork Orange* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The writing here is austere, dialogue is abbreviated, and settings shift quickly. Abraham immediately answers, "Here I am." And God tells him to take his son, Isaac, into another land and offer him as sacrifice on a mountain. A sacrifice! How can this be?

Then, in the next scene it's morning. Abraham already has saddled his donkey and split wood for the fire that will consume Isaac's body after he has been slain. The old man, his beloved son, and two servants depart. Is this really happening?

The story jumps to their arrival three days later. Abraham tells the others to wait while he and Isaac worship on the mountain. But he promises they will return! Will Abraham defy God? Father and son leave together, a touching scene, except they carry the wood and the knife; the instruments of death.

But wait! Isaac speaks for the only time. We have wood, fire, and knife, he says, but where is the sacrificial lamb? God will provide the lamb says Abraham.

But the scene shifts again. Reassurance is replaced by terror. Abraham has bound Isaac on the altar and reaches for the knife. Again a voice rolls from heaven, "Abraham!" He hesitates. "Do not harm your son, now I know you fear God, you have not withheld your son." Abraham sees a ram caught in a bush, and sacrifices it instead. Just a coincidence? He names the place "The Lord will provide."

### **II.**

This story produces some anxiety, doesn't it? Why would God do this? We want to believe that God is righteous, and good, and merciful. Why would God put any father through an ordeal like that? And why would he do it to Abraham, who already had found favor with God?

Let's review some background. And we should remember that before Abraham's time there was nothing in the Bible about Hebrews or Jews as we understand that term today. Abraham was the

beginning. We still are early in the Book of Genesis. His story is the next important event in the Bible after the Flood and Tower of Babel, although centuries had passed since those events.

Many years before Isaac's birth Abraham and Sarah lived in ancient Haran, now modern-day Turkey, and God told him to leave and go into the land of Canaan, now modern-day Israel (12:1-5). Shortly thereafter, God made two important promises to Abraham about offspring and land. God said Abraham's descendants would be as numerous as the stars (15:5), and those descendants would be given the land of Canaan as an everlasting possession (17:8).

Abraham believed what God said, and did what God told him to do. He left Haran and went to Canaan with Sarah even though he had no idea how those two promises would ever come to pass.

Then, eleven years later, his son Ishmael was born of Sarah's servant Hagar, as we heard last week (16:15-16). Fourteen years after that, Abraham and Sarah miraculously, and through God's grace, had their son Isaac, even though both were well into their old age. Abraham, in fact, was one hundred years old at the time (21:5).

But just before Isaac was born something else happened that is important for our story. God told Abraham that Isaac would inherit the two promises (Gen. 17:19). Although Ishmael was born first, and although Abraham had six sons after Isaac, God chose Isaac to be Abraham's successor. God's promise of land, which eventually would become Israel, and his promise of descendants, who would become the Old Testament Hebrews, was to be fulfilled only through Isaac.

This raises a big question doesn't it? If God made a promise of land and descendants to Abraham, and then said that Isaac would be the person to take over after Abraham, why would God tell Abraham to kill Isaac and offer him as a sacrifice?

### **III.**

Well, let's go back to the reading. We know that Isaac did not die that day, but we naturally are curious about the circumstances. Some people say God was just testing Abraham's faith. This is a common understanding. Others say that this story foreshadowed Christ's sacrifice in the New Testament. Perhaps there is some truth to those ideas, but I think there is more to it.

I don't believe Abraham's faith was the central issue. His faith already was known to God (Gen 15:6). New Testament writings confirm his belief in God's promises as faith (Rom. 4:13-16, Heb. 11:8,11). Nothing in the Bible suggests his faith was lacking. And he acted in faith when he set out for the mountain with Isaac (Heb. 11:17). Indeed, faith is a gift and thus God knows whether or not we have it (1 Cor. 12:9, Eph. 2:8). We cannot create faith on our own. But obedience that comes from faith is another matter. We do control that, and it can be tested.

What if God wanted this story to be a continuing example of Abraham's obedience for the ages rather than a one-time demonstration of faith for him? Perhaps God intended that Abraham's obedience should be understood as a threshold act to be known and followed by generations yet to come; an act that was necessary for a larger responsive act by God. If this story is less about Abraham's faith and more about God's purposes, then the story might be more easily understood.

Let's look at the big picture. Abraham was destined to become the earthly father of the Hebrew people. God was beginning something very important with him. From Abraham the twelve tribes of Israel would emerge, and a great nation under David and Solomon eventually would be formed. A lot of the Old Testament traces its origins back to God's promises to Abraham.

So, it's likely, don't you think, that God would want all the Hebrew people for all time to understand from the beginning what he expected from them. The time was right for God to establish the principles that would be at the foundation of his relationship with the people he had chosen as his own. If this understanding of today's reading is correct, God was less

interested in satisfying himself about Abraham's faith, and more interested in sending a message to the descendants that God promised to Abraham.

And that message, simply stated, was that God expected obedience, and in return he would provide for them. God delivered the message through today's reading, a story that would be recorded and repeated throughout the ages as the definitive example of obedience and provision.

So, perhaps these events were played out, not for those who were there but for those to come. Perhaps Abraham knew he would not take his son's life. Why else would he tell the servants they both would be back when they left for the mountain (22:5)? Abraham had no reason to deceive servants. And where was Sarah in the story? She aggressively defended Isaac against perceived threats from Ishmael (Gen. 21:9-12), but is silent here. Finally, why did Abraham, who so boldly negotiated with God over the fate of Sodomites who were strangers to him (Gen. 18:22-32), not advance any claim to the life of his own beloved son? He didn't even protest God's command.

And it also is apparent that God never intended that Isaac would die because that would defeat his promise to Abraham of descendants and land. But Abraham nevertheless did what God said, and the story forever became part of the Jewish faith as the standard for a relationship with God.

#### IV.

So, this is not just a message for Old Testament times. The story ends on a mountaintop in the land of Moriah, but its impact reaches through the ages. We know that God's hopes and plans for the Hebrew people have been extended to all people through Jesus Christ. And we know we are called to be obedient now, just as Abraham was called to be obedient then.

Paul made this clear in today's reading from Romans when he said that we can choose to disobey God, which leads to spiritual death, or we can do our best to live Christian lives according to Jesus' teachings, which leads to righteousness (6:16).

In John's Gospel Jesus said "those who love me will keep my word, and the Father will love them, and we will come and make our home with them" (14:21). And in Luke he said that blessed are those who hear the Word of God and obey it (11:28).

But I think we all know that obedience does not come naturally, especially when we are not the beneficiaries, and especially when we are doing the giving rather than the receiving. We will hear a sermon about that next week, and so today I will simply make the point that today's Old Testament reading brings God's Word into New Testament times, and the Word does not change. God asks for our obedience, and in return God will provide.

#### V.

This story is the defining moment in Abraham's life. It's the point of departure for fulfillment of God's promises as history unfolds. And he never speaks with God again. But it doesn't end there.

Let's go back to the movies for an ending. Using the cinematic technique of sudden shifts of scene I mentioned earlier, we could jump from the near-death of Isaac to Abraham's death years later and Isaac, as a grown man, mourning his father's passing. Then in rapid succession we could see Isaac's son Jacob, and Jacob's son Joseph and his eleven brothers in captivity in Egypt, and four hundred years would pass. The clouds would be racing overhead.

And then there would be Moses, and freedom, and the Exodus, and Moses preaching in the wilderness of Sinai. And the camera would pull back, hundreds of thousands of Abraham's descendants behind him, and the promised land in front. God did what he said. The next shot would be present day, perhaps a busy city during rush hour, and the unstated question would linger—what will we do? And we would know this much; We obey and God will provide. *Amen.*