

Sermon – Return of the Child

Scripture – Genesis 22:1-14, Romans 4:18-24

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Today's first scripture reading is Genesis 22:1-4. This reading offers insight into the life of the father of our faith, Abraham and presents us with perhaps one of the most powerful and troublesome passages in all of Scripture. The account of Abraham's near sacrifice of his son Isaac has baffled and challenged people of faith for several thousand years. What does this incident teach us about what it means to have faith? And what does it teach us about the nature of this God whom we also call Father? Hear now the word God.

*1 After these things God tested Abraham. God said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 2 God 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." 3 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. 4 On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. 5 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." 6 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. 7 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?" 8 Abraham said, "God will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together. 9 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. 10 Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. 11 But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 12 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." 13 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. 14 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."*

In our second scripture reading Romans 4:18-25 the Apostle Paul commends Abraham's faith and challenges early Christians to the same level of loyalty and trust in relationship to the Son of God, who in his death and resurrection, was also returned to his Father. Hear now God's word.

*18 Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So numerous shall your descendants be." 19 He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. 20 No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, 21 being fully convinced that God was able to do what God had promised. 22 Therefore his faith "was reckoned to him as righteousness." 23 Now the words, "it was reckoned to him," were written not for his sake alone, 24 but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in God who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, 25 who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.*

The title of the sermon: "Return of the Child"

*Text: ...being fully convinced that God was able to do what God has promised. Romans 5:21*

Let us pray: We thank you, dear God, that our assumptions about who you are often fall short and that your love for us is more than we could possibly know or hope for. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

The summer following my marriage to Peter, I had the privilege of participating in a tradition that had grown to have deep meaning for his family. I was in Wilmot, New Hampshire on the annual youth mission trip with 17 high school friends and three adult sponsors from the church I was serving. Our mission was to paint the red barn red at Camp Wilmot, a Presbyterian camp located about five miles from where Peter's parents lived at the time.

We were honored (all 21 of us) to join the Kieffer Family in Stowe, Vermont for their annual trek up Mount Mansfield. The two mile hike usually occurs on Father's Day because that is the Sunday closest to the birthday of Polly Kieffer. Polly died in 1977 at the age of nine from Leukemia. She was Peter's younger sister. Polly loved to climb and ski on this mountain and so it was here that the Kieffers gathered for a memorial service after her death and where they came each year to remember and celebrate her life.

Near Polly's tree an inter-faith mountain chapel was built in honor of her life. This was possible because of the generosity and diligence of many people, including the Kieffers, who wanted to honor the tragic loss of this young and vital little girl.

As I sat in the chapel surrounded by the young people for whom I felt a great deal of responsibility I was reminded of how tender the gift of children is and how tragic it is when we lose one of them. There is certainly no greater loss or deeper sorrow for a mother and father to endure in this life than to lose a child.

Perhaps that is why the story of Abraham and Isaac is so troublesome for so many. We can understand most of the ups and downs of Abraham and Sarah's life together as recorded in the Book of Genesis. We admire their willingness to venture from the security of what they knew into God's future as their journey of faith begins. We feel the burden and frustration of the call to Abraham to be the father of many nations in light of Sarah's inability to conceive... We tolerate Sarah offering her handmaid Hagar to sleep with Abraham as a possible fertility solution only in light of the cultural norm of that time and place... Sarah giving birth at age ninety is difficult to grasp and some of us deep down think it might have been more appropriate for Sarah to cry than to laugh... Hagar and Abraham's son Ishmael being sent away from the family after Isaac was born seems cruel at best as we explored together last Sunday. We find comfort to read that the angel of the Lord protects this mother and child giving them a future and a hope.

But the story of God testing Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his son Isaac as a burnt offering is particularly difficult to integrate or accept. The Interpreter's Bible Commentary acknowledges the difficulty in this passage and offers some background that helps put this story into perspective.

*Human sacrifice was an actual custom among some of the Canaanite tribes. It was practiced for centuries. If men worshiping pagan gods would carry their religion to this terrific cost, how could Abraham show that his religion meant as much to him. By including this story in the Scriptures, it becomes clear that Abraham's devotion to Yahweh was capable of going to the furthest point religion could reach.*

However, the utter joy in this biblical story is what we learn about Yahweh when we actually hear God's voice. We learn that God expects and desires something quite different from what Abraham first supposed and feared.

*The climax is not the sacrifice of Isaac but the word from God that Isaac shall not be sacrificed. The story that began with threatened tragedy ends in a oneness between the heart of God and the heart of man. The Old Testament is continually lifting the conception of God out of the irrationality and arbitrariness of pagan superstition. So when the Almighty is revealed in Genesis 22, God is not destiny or fate or some cruel pagan deity but God is our Father. We see the mercy of God in the "return of the child" to Abraham.*

And so the story not only teaches us about the trust and faith of Abraham, it also confirms the trustworthiness and faithfulness of God, who desires mercy and not sacrifice.

And when God did allow sacrifice in the story of our faith as with God's only son Jesus on the cross, God entered into and identified so strongly with this human suffering that it became redeeming and life giving. In the death and resurrection of Jesus we find our way home to our Father God.

Often we discover that in our own lives, experiences of sacrifice and loss can create the setting for acts of courage and faith. We see this among members and friends of Westminster and I would like to share such a story from the Kieffer family. (pause)

Over the last five decades scientific research, through the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, has discovered treatments which have transformed A.L.L. (the most common type of childhood leukemia which took Polly Kieffer's life). It has moved from essentially an incurable disease to one, which for the most part, may be overcome through months or years of treatment.

This did not come about without sacrifice. As with all medical research to discover the best treatment one must compare the outcome of many treatments. And so with each discovery there were children who improved and children who did not. For each success there was a sacrifice.

In 1986 the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society created an award to recognize acts of courage and faith among medical scientists and others who have made significant contributions toward the cure. This award entitled "The Return of the Child" is a bronze sculpture, which portrays Abraham holding Isaac in his arms, and embracing him following God's intervention. The sculptor, who was Peter's father, the late Will Kieffer, wrote a statement which embodies the richness of the metaphor:

*In the Leukemia Society of America we have our own Abrahams. The researchers plug away seemingly endlessly taking on inordinate risks and working to the point of despair. Our clinicians struggle daily against bad odds taking incredible life-affecting risks (with children) and*

*risking their own lives through too long hours and high stress. Our loyal and productive staffers and volunteers raise and administer the funds and resources and see that the work gets done...*

*All this strength and courage aside, the real heroes are our patients and their families. They never know the real odds against them. Because of their faith the majority of the patients with ALL are no longer dying. They are living—living longer and normal lives. It is they who have unraveled the enigma of Isaac. Isaac represents the reward of faith, the 'Return of the Child.'"*

When Will created the bronze sculpture for this award he not only made a theological statement but a personal one as well. It was his way of saying thank you for the return of his child. Polly lived seven years after she was diagnosed with ALL and treated as a part of the Yale/New Haven Study group and every day she lived was a gift.

And it was a way for a father to understand the sacrifice of his child as a gift to the children who live and benefit from the treatment today. It was a way for him to accept his own loss in faith, trusting in the God of Abraham who loves us like a father. *Amen.*