

An Unthinkable Trial

Presented By Pastor Scott Walters on 6/28/20
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If you are new to Crossroads worship. If this is the first sermon you've heard me offer. If you really haven't read much from the Bible and have heard a lot of horror stories about it: Please forgive me for today.

Not all the stories in the scriptures are this troubling. This one is hard to hear. Perhaps you can see why we are using today's story in our sermon series, "God's Dysfunctional Family."

It is hard to believe that the God I worship and about whom I preach is the God in today's scripture story from Genesis.

Can you imagine the story line if this were on CNN? "Old Codger caught within inches of murdering his son; says God told him to do it."

It would probably get good ratings and a lot of "hits" online for at least a couple of news cycles.

There is a very real temptation to say, well, Abraham in fact, didn't sacrifice Isaac. Everything, in the end, turned out Okay, right?

Sometimes in the church there is a tendency to act as though "everything is okay." If we have to air-brush something to make it appear better, let's go ahead and do it. We want to avoid the difficult and the ugly.

The usual explanation of the meaning of this story is that God is a God who provides; or we speak, knowing the end of the story, looking with 20/20 hindsight vision, knowing that Isaac doesn't die in the story and we talk about how wonderful it is that Abraham is willing to obey God.

I think I speak for a good number of us, when I say, "We are willing to give our hearts over to God, but we will give without actually changing the way we live."

You see, we know that God loves us and we convince ourselves that we are safe if we are just willing to sacrifice. To be willing is good enough; we don't actually have to give anything up.

And yet, when you lean into the details, this story is anything but safe. It is difficult.

Little did Abraham know, but when he answered, "Here I Am," he was making himself open to something scary. Because what happens next is that God calls Abraham to something difficult.

When God call us - and I say 'when' and not 'if' - and we respond like Abraham, "Here I am, Lord," or "We are your Church ready to live for you," God is going to call us to mission.

There may be some people listening or watching to this very message who feel called to some kind of ministry or mission or service - and I don't necessarily mean the ordained kind of ministry. And God will call you. And it will be scary.

And that is as it should be because when it's comfortable, we tend to 'stand pat' - and that includes me.

It is when we are uncomfortable; when we wrestle with these stories of scripture, that our faith grows. It is those moments when we ask questions. It is not that we are doubting our faith; it is that we are being gutsy enough to find out who this God is and what this God wants with the like of us.

Abraham said, "Here I am," and God calls him to something difficult. Isn't it interesting that after Abraham says those three words, he doesn't say anything else to God. Was he angry? Was he questioning? Was he doubting?

But he did get the old axe out and began to chop wood the next morning. And unlike some chapters of the Bible where generations are described at the blink of an eye, today's 14 verses feel like

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they are in super-slow motion.

When life is happening too fast for me, I know that I need to slow it down. I'll go for a walk; or I'll go to the driving range.

Abraham was silent. But God was silent too.

When Barbara Brown Taylor wrote about Abraham in this passage she said, "God was silent when Abraham saddled his donkey and went away with his servant and his child. God was silent for the trip and the 3 days it took them to find the place."

That's 3 days on the road. Three days lost in his thoughts and with a number of unanswerable questions from Isaac. Three days.

When they got to the place, the only voice Abraham heard was his own. He told his servants, "Stay here. Isaac and I will worship over there and we'll come back." It was a lie. Abraham had not assurance that he AND Isaac were coming back from the mountain.

But what are you going to do?

What if worship was so intense that you didn't know if you were coming back the same? What was he to do?

When they had come to that place that God had shown them, there was no Lamb in sight. Even though Isaac asked Abraham, "Where is the lamb?" Abraham said, "God will provide." What could he say to his son??

When they got there, there was NO LAMB and NO word from God.

I'm guessing there was plenty of grunting as Abraham lifted stones for the building of the altar. That is a powerful image – the image of a boy carrying the burden of his own demise.

But as Abraham was building that fire, I wonder if what he was really doing was listening – listening for something – anything – till he could find no more reasons to stall.

But God wasn't going to speak and Abraham couldn't dally any longer. Not a word was said: not Abraham; not Isaac; not God. And he took the knife to kill his son – in some ways one of the momentous moments in scripture.

And I think the scriptures are brutally honest about the fact that there are difficult moments in our lives. There are going to be times in your life when you feel like you have not heard the Word of God. There are going to be times in your life when you are going to be heading in a direction that may seem scary and you are going to be asking for God to send the Word to say "NO," just as Abraham was waiting for God to say NO.

And, of course, there are times when God does deliver us from our struggles – but there are also moment when we "struggle through."

And so we turn to this story of Abraham and Isaac knowing full well that even in that silence, God was present.

And as a preacher and as a Christian, I would love to put a nice beautiful bow on this story for you....But again, I think we are called to wrestle with our faith. We are called to wrestle with scripture, because life is tragic and beautiful and even brutal, and God is with us during all of it.

The same God who calls us to scary things is the same God who makes that journey step by step. It's the same God who was in the tomb for 3 days, just as Abraham journeyed 3 days to land of Moriah.

And here in this story, we have Abraham who praised God for not giving up his one beloved son and only beloved son.

The next time in scripture we see language of "beloved son" is in the New Testament, in the Gospel of John, where it says that "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." But in the

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Gospel, Jesus is NOT spared. The Son of God is not spared but is killed on a Roman cross.

I don't usually make direct connections between persons in the Hebrew scriptures and Jesus, but when I look at this story in Genesis and wonder: Jesus is NOT Isaac in this story. Jesus is the ram caught in the thicket. Jesus is the one who dies on behalf of others.

And so, just as Isaac was set free, and was freed of that burden on his back going up the mountain, I look at this story and realize it is US who are Isaac - and the burdens we bear; the sin we carry, and the life we lead.

WE are the beloved children of God set free. It is wondrous that God would love us that much.

I like knowing that God's hope is not for death. I like that in the end, Isaac is set free. And I praise the God who wants freedom in life for all of God's children. Amen.

