

SERMON: Where is the Lamb?
TEXT: Genesis 22:1-14

6-28-2020

It was the summer of 1996 when I first was faced with the possibility of having to preach on this passage. My initial reaction was to reject it outright. I had been in ordained ministry for about a year-and-a-half, and things had been going very well with the church I served. But it was less about how the congregation might respond to a sermon on this passage, than it was about whether I could face the challenge. I didn't want to preach about Abraham sacrificing Isaac because I had a baby boy at home who was just over two years old. And I couldn't even read the story without crying.

It's a difficult story, to say the least. And very often, it's the passages that I most want to avoid that I feel the strongest call from God to preach. I mean, it would certainly be a hundred times easier to preach on the Matthew passage for today. The words about welcoming God and welcoming one another and sharing a cup of cold water. It's so pleasant and easy on our ears and on our spirits to dwell on the subject of hospitality.

But, no. Most often the Holy Spirit insists that I confront the most challenging passages. And not in spite of my tears, but more likely, because of my tears.

There was a man in one of my former churches who attended regularly with his wife and two boys. He was a college professor, and I always sensed that he was precariously perched on a precipice between deep faith and deep skepticism. One day he asked me about this story, “What kind of God would ask a parent to do that, to sacrifice their child?” It’s a fair question. And not an easy one to answer.

Especially for Abraham, who had waited for this child all of his life. Over a hundred years of waiting for God to make good on his promise for the most precious gift anyone could ask for - the gift of a child. Then, even before the child is fully grown, what does God do but ask Abraham to return him. To make of him a burnt offering. To sacrifice him - to kill him - in order to prove his love for God.

It’s horrific. Unthinkable. Cruel and unusual punishment of the highest order. And it makes me angry.

But Abraham doesn't so much as blink, before putting God's plan into action. In fact, it seems as though there is no point along the journey where Abraham hesitates.

“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.*”

The story continues as if it is some sort of father-son bonding ritual.

“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.*”

WHERE IS THE LAMB? Even upon hearing that innocent, trusting question, Abraham doesn't even have to swallow hard before he replies, "God himself will provide the lamb."

"God will provide." Unfortunately, this sounds too much like one of those insensitive platitudes that people use when they want to deny their own or someone else's pain. "It's God's will." "This too shall pass." "She's in a better place." True as they may be, such statements are often not helpful or comforting in a time of great pain.

And I would imagine that Isaac is beginning to feel some confusion and fear. WHERE IS THE LAMB is maybe not as innocent as it sounds. Sensing by now that something is not quite right, Isaac is asking a legitimate question. He needs assurance and he's looking for answers. But Abraham doesn't have any easy answers. Because there are no easy answers. The best he can do is to say what perhaps he's been praying all along the journey. God will provide. "God, please provide."

“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.”

In the end, Abraham’s loyalty was rewarded and God did indeed provide when an angel spoke from heaven. *"Abraham, Abraham! And he said, Here I am. [The angel] 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."*

So, I guess all’s well that ends well? But I’m still over here crying. Not tears of relief or joy, but the same tears of sorrow and anger as I had at the beginning of the story. Why? Because there are countless people I know who have shown just as much faith and loyalty as Abraham - perhaps even more. And they didn’t hear an angel’s voice, and they didn’t get a ram in the thicket. And they did have to sacrifice a beloved child. WHERE IS THE LAMB for them?

Then I remember a short film I saw during the season of Lent at my home church. I think I was a teenager at the time. The story was of a happy family: father, mother, a young son, and another child on the way. The father worked with the railroad, operating a lift bridge that spanned a large body of water. One day while he was working, his wife went into labor at home. She sent their young son to run to the bridge to tell his father. The boy ran along the tracks, yelling and waving his arms to get his father's attention. Just as the father saw his son coming from one direction, he also knew that a passenger train was approaching the bridge from the other side. It was too late to lift the bridge. The train would not be able to stop and would go crashing into the water, killing all the people on board. But if the train continued forward, his precious son would be killed. The father looked in horror from his son to the train full of people and back to his son.

I don't think I have to tell you the end of the story, other than to say, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son."

In the end, God is Father who makes the ultimate sacrifice for every single one of us, whether our faith is large or small.

WHERE IS THE LAMB? God will provide.

May our faith grow ever deeper to fathom the depth of God's love... to the
glory of God!

AMEN.