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*Brought Back From Death To Life*

Genesis 22:1-14, Romans 6:12-14

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**Genesis 22:1-14**

<sup>2</sup>After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." <sup>2</sup>He 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."

<sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. <sup>5</sup>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." <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>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?" <sup>8</sup>Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together. <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.

<sup>11</sup>But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." <sup>12</sup>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." <sup>13</sup>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. <sup>14</sup>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."

This Bible story—the story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac—is one of the first ones I remember learning in Sunday School. I don't know how old I was when it came up in the lesson plans—whether it was Grandma Nutt's kindergarten class (she wasn't really my

grandma, she was the mother of my dad's brother's wife, but close enough to call her that) where the stories got acted out by paper figures stuck to a flannel sheet. Or maybe it was Mrs. Capps' first grade class, where we got stars on the chart for remembering Bible verses like "The Lord will provide," which truth be told I could still read off the erased but not washed chalkboard in the room the next Sunday.

It's a Bible story, I've found, that a lot of people who grew up in church remember. A person can get nostalgic hearing these old stories, like this one about faith and commitment, devotion and sacrifice.

The first time I preached on this text was when in my first call, as a pastor in Parkville, Missouri. For the reading of the story, we had father and his 8-year-old son enact portions of the text, walking up the aisle of the church, carrying a pile of wood for the altar, pausing at the front, his son, his only son, whom we all loved, kneeling.

And that is the moment, that I thought about this sacred text what I can't believe I hadn't thought a hundred times before, that I hadn't thought when I first heard it as a 5-year-old: This is a terrible story. I looked at that dad, an elder, a businessman, standing there with his hand on his son's shoulder. I looked at the sweet face of the kid who came to the early service in his soccer uniform on Sundays when he had a game. And I thought why in God's name did Grandma Nutt put this on a flannelgraph? How did parents and pastors even let children hear this story?

Abraham is supposed to be a hero of God's people, but what kind of father would raise a knife to their son, no matter what some voice from heaven told him?

And what kind of God, would ask a father to do such a thing, regardless of how the story is supposed to end?

It is terrible. It is a story of brokenness, not beauty. It is a story of anguish, violence, horror. From the first time Abraham hears the Lord's voice, the story walks toward death, death that looms like a mountain. Even if there is sun rising behind that mountain of death, Abraham, Isaac, you and I are walking toward the mountain in its shadow, and I'm not sure the ending feels so much like resolution as a pause, a moment frozen. Isaac is still alive, but we are wounded.

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This year, this moment, feels immersed in anguish. There is fear in the air, fear of a virus we cannot see but which is wreaking real pain and suffering, sometimes in people we love. There is holy anger at the murders of Black people in this country and deep soul-searching about the white supremacy that since our founding has underlay every aspect of our country's culture and politics and law. Protests in our streets—violent or not—are

designed to unsettle us ... and we need some unsettling, so accustomed have we become to ignoring the truth before our eyes, defying our senses, even our conscience.

And whether it is police sirens, or pangs of conscience, or the beeping of a loved one's respirator that keeps us awake, in this moment, waking up is precisely what is needed. Waking up, after all, is the difference between death and life.

You see the story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac isn't just terrible. It is also true. And the more I read this story now, as a adult, I see Abraham not as a 100-year-old man with a long beard and sandals. Not even as the symbol of God's people. I see him as me. I see him as you.

It is of course the story of a man who is devoted, that's what our Sunday School teachers wanted us to see, a man who like us, in our own stumbling and imperfect ways, tries to do the right things, tries to hear God's voice and do what God wants us to do. Abraham will go to great lengths to do what in a moment he perceives to be right, and I bet you will too—an act of extravagant generosity, or unusual boldness. We can be courageous people.

But we also, like Abraham, can be impulsive people. And I refuse to believe that whoever first put pen to paper or stylus to papyrus, whatever grandparent told this story to their grandchildren around a fire 3000 years ago, didn't know how barbaric it was to suggest that Abraham offering to kill his son was an act of devotion. They knew it was a terrible story when they told it. And maybe the best way to hear this story is as a cautionary tale, as a story of how we, in our acts of devotion, sometimes do exactly the wrong thing. I see it in my own life, and in lives of those around me.

Our desire to keep the peace leads us to tolerate and defend a system that brings death and calamity to people of color, silence paving the way for death.

Our desire to be generous with our own individual acts of compassion or care blinding us to the need for systemic changes that would lift generations and neighborhoods from persistent poverty.

Our desire to worship and share in God's gift of fellowship and community leading to giving ourselves permission to gather too soon, putting public health and the lives of friends and strangers at risk.

Abraham was devoted to God. But faith was never designed to operate without sense. Following never meant putting on a blindfold. Obedience can never use ignorance as an excuse.

That's how well-meaning missionaries ended up establishing colonial rule over nations and peoples, forming patterns of dependence and oppression

That's how talk of morals and values kept LGBTQ people out of the church and away from the gospel and sometimes from the Thanksgiving dinner table and the love of their families.

And that's how Abraham found himself walking toward the mountain to kill his son. When I hear the angel of the Lord crying out as Abraham raises the knife, I don't hear appreciation in the angel's voice, I hear terror. "Wait! What are you doing?! Wake up, Abraham. Get a hold of yourself, man." Abraham didn't so much pass the test, as he forced God to cancel the exam. "All right. All right. I know you fear God. Now untie your son, for God's sake." And only then does this story become bearable. Only when the story's trajectory is disturbed. Only when Abraham does NOT do the thing that in obedience he thought he was called to do. Only when he changes his plan ... does this become a story not of death, but of life.

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It would be many centuries after these stories were first told, that Paul would write to the Romans about death and life in *their* bodies. He wrote in another shadow of death, this one a cross-shaped shadow, remembering one who had offered his own body, another innocent lamb, another beloved Son.

And to a group of Christians who dare to say they have been changed, transformed by God's power. To a group of believers who are striving to worship God not only by building altars but in how they live, Paul writes:

#### **Romans 6:12-14**

<sup>12</sup>Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. <sup>13</sup>No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. <sup>14</sup>For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

Our story—yours and mine, I mean--is set in a place of anguish and brokenness, of violence and death. And it would be so easy to let the sin that is all around us exercise dominion over us, too. To be ruled by it.

And what Paul names for us is that we have control, we have agency over these bodies of ours, our members—our hands and feet, our minds and mouth. They are tools or weapons. They are instruments ... either of wickedness, or of righteousness. They are knives for

slaying our nation's children, or they are knives for cutting loose the ropes that bind them. They are torches for destroying the homes and lives of our neighbors, or they bear the flames that will burn down walls that divide and structures that imprison.

Which will it be, people of God? "Present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life," scripture says. "For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace."

In Jesus Christ, God has delivered an expansive, powerful grace, stronger than law, freedom from bondage, an end to humanity laid on altars to be sacrificed, but rather set free for transformation of a broken world.

At the end of the encounter on the mountaintop, we are told that God provides a ram caught in a thicket. A ram, not a lamb, like Abraham had told Isaac God would provide. A ram, older, less perfect. It's a bit of a messy ending to a story, that we can see was pretty messy to begin with. Just like our stories. The story moves from death to life, but the life it moves to isn't easy or idealized or complete. It just continues. And it will be up to Abraham and Isaac to decide its next steps, and whether the future will hold more violence and terror, or something different. That is ... life.

This is our story, too. We stand there, frozen, wounded ... but alive. Given the grace to go back down the mountain, how will we use our tools, our weapons ... as instruments of wickedness or of righteousness? What will you do to follow God out of the shadow, and work to bring the world from death ... to life?

Amen.