

“I’m Here”
Genesis 22:1-19
Pollocksville Presbyterian Church
Sermon #61
4th Sunday After Pentecost
15th Sunday in the COVID-19 Pandemic
6.28.20

Genesis 22:1-19

22 After these events, God tested Abraham and said to him,
“Abraham!”

Abraham answered, “I’m here.”

2 God said, “Take your son, your only son whom you love, Isaac,
and go to the land of Moriah. Offer him up as an entirely burned
offering there on one of the mountains that I will show you.” **3**

Abraham got up early in the morning, harnessed his donkey, and
took two of his young men with him, together with his son Isaac. He
split the wood for the entirely burned offering, set out, and went to
the place God had described to him.

4 On the third day, Abraham looked up and saw the place at a distance.**5** Abraham said to his servants, “Stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will walk up there, worship, and then come back to you.”

6 Abraham took the wood for the entirely burned offering and laid it on his son Isaac. He took the fire and the knife in his hand, and the two of them walked on together. **7** Isaac said to his father Abraham, “My father?”

Abraham said, “I’m here, my son.”

Isaac said, “Here is the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the entirely burned offering?”

8 Abraham said, “The lamb for the entirely burned offering? God will see to it, my son.” The two of them walked on together.

9 They arrived at the place God had described to him. Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He tied up his son Isaac and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. **10** Then Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to kill his son as a sacrifice. **11** But the Lord's messenger called out to Abraham from heaven, "Abraham? Abraham?"

Abraham said, "I'm here."

12 The messenger said, "Don't stretch out your hand against the young man, and don't do anything to him. I now know that you revere God and didn't hold back your son, your only son, from me."

13 Abraham looked up and saw a single ram caught by its horns in the dense underbrush. Abraham went over, took the ram, and offered it as an entirely burned offering instead of his son. **14**

Abraham named that place “the Lord sees.” That is the reason people today say, “On this mountain the Lord is seen.”

15 The Lord’s messenger called out to Abraham from heaven a second time **16** and said, “I give my word as the Lord that because you did this and didn’t hold back your son, your only son, **17** I will bless you richly and I will give you countless descendants, as many as the stars in the sky and as the grains of sand on the seashore. They will conquer their enemies’ cities. **18** All the nations of the earth will be blessed because of your descendants, because you obeyed me.” **19** After Abraham returned to the young men, they got up and went to Beer-sheba where Abraham lived.

The Word of the LORD. **Thanks be to God.**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

If you are a fan of the visual arts, maybe you've gone to your fair share of art galleries. Possibly, you can recall some great moments in art history if you took Art Appreciation as an undergraduate student. Certainly, artists throughout history received inspiration from Bible stories. Then, they created some of the most fascinating and haunting images that, if we are honest with ourselves, are commentaries on those stories. Truly, the Bible is the source for some of the most provocative works of art in history. Today's scripture, among many others, has been used as

inspiration for artists for hundreds of years including one painting attributed to Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio in 1603 called the *Sacrifice of Isaac*.

Allow me to describe this painting in detail to you and imagine yourselves standing in front of it. Abraham has a knife in his right hand. His left hand clamps down around Isaac's throat who is bound up, bent over, and screaming in terror. If you're looking at the portrait, Abraham with his bald head and beard is facing an angel to your left who is struggling with the Patriarch's right arm to keep him from cutting the throat of Isaac as if he were the sacrificial animal. Then, to your right is a ram. Hiding in the bush. You can see only its head and horns, but there it is being pointed to by the angel.

It is a disturbing image. Caravaggio doesn't hold back many punches.

Considering today's verses in light of the Israelites exiled in Babylon, if they had the painting in front of them, they may have felt like any of the three characters depicted in this work of art. Maybe they felt like Isaac: Bound up, screaming in terror, and thought they were going to die. Maybe they felt like Abraham: Preparing to sacrifice their own. Maybe those who were part of the prophetic voices God had sent saw themselves as the angel trying to keep these chosen people from harming their own and pointing out the ram in the bush that God had provided for them.

Like last week's passage on Hagar and Ishmael, this week's scripture is traumatic. There's no denying the trauma and I want to honor that because this story may stir up unwanted thoughts or feelings. Why would God even test Abraham in this way? Did God really tell Abraham to do this? Maybe Abraham thought he heard God? Y'all, it's ok to ask questions about hard passages.

And this isn't the first time Abraham prepares to sacrifice his son. He certainly sacrificed his first son, Ishmael, in the previous chapter by casting him and his mother out in the wilderness. Yet, as we've read today, different instruments of torture are used and it's just as cruel.

There are so many ways one could go with this story and I want to tell you that I hear you. My hope, as always, is to do my part as faithfully as possible as a Minister of the Word and Sacrament. If I come off as having the answers to these problematic verses, then I have failed. I don't have the answers nor will I pretend to do so because that is spiritual malpractice and I couldn't live with myself knowing that I simply ignored the harsh realities of what is in front of us today. And as I wrestle with these 19 verses, I keep going back to what they would mean to a people living in a foreign land while their homes have been wiped away and they are possibly the only survivors of their families.

As is the recurring theme in Genesis, nothing is ever hopeless. Kathleen M. O'Connor gives us some insight on how we can approach this difficult story.¹ Abraham and Isaac represent an entire community and this community is in exile in Babylon. The elderly father and young son look like they are facing extinction, just like the people living in Babylon. Sure, Ishmael survived, but if Isaac dies, the promise to Abraham and these people in exile ceases instantly. Like the Israelites in captivity, Isaac and Abraham will face their end of life together while their stories become absorbed or even forgotten by their captors. Captors who were not originally part of this promise God had been sharing with Abraham for nearly ten chapters in Genesis.

¹ Kathleen M. O'Connor. *Genesis: 1-25A*. Smyth & Helwys: Atlanta, 2018, p.317.

The Israelites living in Babylon can easily see themselves in today's story and in Caravaggio's painting. On the brink of extinction.

Maybe they'll be granted a footnote in history, if the Babylonians feel like it.

When all seems hopeless, a voice cries out: "Stop!" Suddenly, a new way forward is provided by the hand of God. It's as if God never truly abandoned Abraham, Isaac, or the people in exile. For Abraham and Isaac, God promises that the lineage will continue and the descendants will be numerous. For the community of Israelites in a strange land, this story helps them come to terms with their traumatic past and to look forward to their brighter future known only to God who has given them a glimpse of the relief that

is to come. The firstborn, Isaac, and the firstborn community are spared to live fruitful lives that will bless the nations of the earth.

This broken community who seems to have lost everything has been reminded and promised that God's relationship with them never ended, God never abandoned them, and God promises to strengthen that relationship. For these people in Babylon who may be the last survivors of their families, hearing the words that God will make the offspring of Isaac more numerous than the grains of sand will help them realize that there is a brighter future. There is an end to their suffering.

Maybe after being the butt of the joke for many nations around the world during their captivity, maybe as they begin to make sense of what is to come next, the exiled community in Babylon realizes that they will not only survive this time when they are like Isaac. Yes, they feel the hand around their throat, the thing they see in front of them is the blade of the knife, and they are screaming in terror. Upon hearing this story, the community realizes that they will not only survive this near extinction event, but will thrive once again. They realize their resiliency and go forth in their lives not as helpless people, but as agents of change in the world, through the LORD's power. And let's be honest with ourselves, when we go through trauma, we try to make sense of it all in the aftermath, and it is no different for our spiritual ancestors thousands of years ago in Babylon.

As the Israelites hearing this story thousands of years ago begin to accept that they, through the LORD's strength, are agents of change in the world, do you think they'll pay attention to the words the prophets had spoken to them long before this humiliating captivity? Words like "Love the LORD your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength and love your neighbors as yourself." I would think so. I would think that even after multiple chances of turning from harmful ways that did nothing but bring heartache, our spiritual ancestors may have finally begun to grasp the message the LORD had been telling them for hundreds of years. And now as they live in captivity and face their eventual release back home, they take these words more seriously than before.

And today? What about us? We've read and discussed this story in light of our own circumstances whether they are personal or global. Maybe some of us feel a sort of exile right now wondering if this is it. Yet, the LORD promised to never leave us alone. We haven't been abandoned and we won't be abandoned. Even though circumstances are cruddy right now in our society and as we stand on the precipice of major positive changes, we hear that messenger of the LORD who calls us by name and points to that metaphorical ram in the bush.....the way forward that only God can create for us in God's own impeccable timing. The path that God provides, even if we have ignored it for some time, echoes the words God spoke through the prophets long ago as we continue our ministries as agents of change: "Love the LORD your God with

all your heart, mind, soul, and strength and love your neighbor as yourself.”

Siblings in Christ, be comforted by this Good News!

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer. Amen.