

Behold the Lamb of God<sup>1</sup>  
Genesis 21:1–3, 22:1–14  
John 1:29

Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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Genesis 21:1–3, 22:1–14

The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. ...

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” 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.”

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.” 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.” 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.

But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” 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.” 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. 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.”

John 1:29

The next day he [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”

Well, this is a story that is not often preached. I learned after I'd decided to preach it today that Ms. McKay spoke about it on one of the Sundays she was here this Summer. But that's okay. This story, like many stories in Scripture, has a lot in there.

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon owes a good deal in its early sections to a commentary by Kaleb Heitzman at <https://medium.com/storied/god-tells-a-man-to-go-kill-a-kid-on-a-mountain-really-fe3f5c235371>. Rev. Heitzman is, of course, not responsible in any way for where I went from there.

You remember Abraham. Abram and his wife Sarai were old people and childless in the city of Ur when God called them to leave the place where they'd been born and grown up, and go to the place that God would show them. God promised that he would give them a son, and that, through that son, they would be ancestors of nations. You can read that story in Genesis, starting in Chapter Twelve.<sup>2</sup>

So now Abraham believes that God has told him to take this son and sacrifice him to God. He packs up his kid and they go off to the mountain. God stops the execution just before it's about to happen. God provides a ram that Abraham sacrifices instead. Sarah is nowhere to be found in this story; I don't believe that she would have been onboard with the idea of sacrificing Isaac.

This story is frequently told as a story about Abraham's faithfulness and obedience. He was willing to sacrifice even his own son, the son that God finally gave Abraham and Sarah after years of infertility. The son through whom God had promised to make Abraham the father of nations.

But I don't think that Abraham's the main character here.

Let's look again.

Let's look at one verse in particular. Genesis 22:5. "Then Abraham said to his servants, 'Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; WE will worship, and then WE will come back to you.'"

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<sup>2</sup> The most specific and explicit promise regarding Isaac is Genesis 17:19.

Did you catch the “WE” part? Abraham knows that Isaac is coming back down the mountain. Abraham knows that no matter what happens on the mountain, Isaac is coming back with him. He knows this because God already promised to bless the world through Isaac.

He does not know how that’s going to happen. But he knows that God keeps God’s promises.

It seems like Abraham already knows that God’s not going to make him kill his son.

So what’s the story here?

Maybe this story isn’t intended to tell us something about Abraham. Maybe it’s intended to tell us something about God.

So what does this story tell us about God, other than the obvious, that God provides?

Let’s look at this story in context. Four thousand years ago in Phoenician culture, and remember, Abraham grew up in Ur, in the Phoenician culture, they had a very specific understanding of the relationship between gods and human beings. They believed that, if a god gave you fertility, then the god was entitled to demand a part of whatever was produced. You gave the god the first fruits from your garden and your fields if you wanted to have a full harvest. If you wanted to have more children, then you had better be willing to sacrifice your firstborn to the gods.

Except for the God of Abraham.

This God, God not of one thing or one place, but God of everything that there is, is not like those other gods. This God, the God whom we worship, is completely unlike those other societies’ idea of what a god was. The God of Abraham is not like the other gods, because this

God does not need or want child sacrifice to bless people. The God of Abraham views every child ever born as made in God's own image. The very idea of child sacrifice has always been anathema to God. God views child sacrifice as an abomination, and always has.

No, our God blesses people because that's the kind of God whom God is. That is God's character.

So why did this story happen?

It's possible that God wanted to show Abraham what kind of a God he was following, or it's possible that Abraham, who grew up worshipping those Phoenician fertility gods, did not understand what God wanted, and God had to correct him.

Why did people write this story down?

It's dramatic, and drama catches our attention. Sometimes we need to be reminded who God is. The God whom we worship, the great I AM, is unlike anyone or anything we've ever seen or imagine. For someone 4,000 years ago hearing this story about a God that doesn't need, or even want, child sacrifice, that would have been mind-blowing.

Why do we still tell this story?

If this were a scene from a popular television show, say "Game of Thrones," the tension would be so thick you couldn't cut it with a knife. This would be chainsaw-level tension. There would be a cliffhanger episode ending, and we'd all have to wait a week, wondering,

"Would a loving God really do this?"

"If Abraham kills Isaac, what happens to God's promises?"

“Is there some plot twist that lets him kill Isaac and God brings him back to life, maybe?”

And there is a plot twist, as Abraham was sure there would be. God provides a ram to be sacrificed.

So what?

What does this mean for us today?

There a lot of misconceptions out there about God’s character. We project all the bad stuff that’s ever happened to us on God, and we try to define who God is and what God wants from that.

As a result, there are people out there who are trying to obey God and follow Jesus Christ, who believe that God hates people whose ancestors came from different places in the world than their ancestors did.

There are people out there who are trying to obey God and follow Jesus Christ, who believe that God hates anyone who loves different people than they do.

There are people out there who are trying to obey God and follow Jesus Christ, who believe that God loves all the people inside this particular set of human-drawn borders and God hates all the people who live inside another set of human-drawn borders.

However, just because you believe something about God, that does not necessarily make it so.

The writer Anne Lamott, whose work I commend to you, said that, “You can safely assume that you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.”<sup>3</sup>

If you believe that God is calling you to hate someone, or to treat them like you hate them, no matter what your rationalization is, then check your context. What’s happening here? Is this hate consistent with the character of the God who loved the entire world so much that he came down here, was born, lived, and died, so that not just some people, but all the people who believed in him would not perish, but have eternal life?<sup>4</sup>

Ask other Christians whom you trust if what you are getting ready to do makes sense, in the context of the God of love. You notice that Abraham does not talk with Sarah before they set out for Mount Moriah. As a result, it takes divine intervention to keep him from killing his own son.

If someone you know tells you that God wants them or you to hate someone, or to treat them like you hate them, no matter what their rationalization is, help them check their context. Ask them, “Is this hate consistent with the character of the God who loved the entire world so much that he came and was himself the lamb for the sacrifice, to show humans how much God loved them?” That’s what John means when he says, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.”

Your mileage may vary, as they say. Your experience may be different from mine. But, thanks to a somewhat varied job history, I have been in the same room with Ku Klux Klansmen

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<sup>3</sup> *Traveling Mercies*; on page 22 of *Bird by Bird* she attributes this to "my priest friend Tom."

<sup>4</sup> John 3:16, my paraphrase.

and with neo-Nazis, and with domestic violence offenders and with murderers, and I have yet to find anyone so bad that treating them like I hated them was consistent with the character of the God of love.

Pitying them, sure.

Feeling sorry for them.

Wishing that their lives had gone differently.

Helping them take their lives in another direction now.

That may be what we are called to do with someone in our lives who believes that God is calling them to hate. Love that person in our lives enough to be the Christian who helps them to check their context. Help them to figure out whether what they are saying and doing is consistent with the character of God, and the character of one of God's children.

I have met many people who hate other people.

But you know what? I have yet to find a human being whom God does not love.

That means that I have yet to find anyone who is an exception to God's commandment to love my neighbor. Even to love my enemy.

If you believe you have, then it's time to check your context.

AMEN.