



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Redeeming Abraham

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, June 29, 2014
The Third Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Genesis 22:1-14*

Among the many treasures in our church is a truly accomplished sequence of sixteen carvings. Fashioned by the Piccirilli Brothers, who also carved the lions at the Main Library and Lincoln at his memorial in D.C., these carvings have been mounted atop the columns that run down each side of the church. It is sometimes difficult to see them in the light. But each of the three-sided capitals, literally holding up this House of God, tells a story from our Scriptures, the Greatest Hits, so to speak. And if you can get a good look at them, they are filled to the brim with life and drama, like a comic strip made of stone. One of the carved capitals features the story that we read to you today from Genesis, a story that many preachers and teachers avoid, and I can understand why. At first blush, it is horrifying. At seventh blush, it's still horrifying.

And yet, there it is, a marvelously wrought summary of the tale: On the first side old father Abraham is leading his son, Isaac, up Mount Moriah for the sacrifice, a donkey laden with kindling sticking out of the corner. Isaac is looking up to his father as if to say, "Where's the lamb for the sacrifice, Dad?" And Abraham is evasive. The next panel, the main one, has Isaac kneeling on the pile of wood at the top of the mountain, looking forward. Is he frozen in fear? Is he defiant? On the left of Isaac, you see his father, with that dreadful knife in his hand. But it's not in the air; it is at his side, for his attention has been caught by a vision. On the other side of his son there's an angel of Yahweh fluttering in the air, saying "Abraham! Abraham! Look!" And the angel is pointing to the corner of the capital, where there is a ram in a thicket, his horns curled into the thorny bush, and he can't get away. Eureka, a substitute! And in the final panel, you see Abraham and his son, reunited, Abraham's arm around Isaac. And they are both looking up at the sacrificial ram. They're there watching the ram burn on the altar in silence and awe. Changed forever.

For me to defend the value of this story, or even just allude to it, seems like I'm asking for trouble. Does this story really belong in church anymore? Does it really belong in that column? It seems like it belongs in a Stephen King movie more than anything else. It would have been more shrewd of me to skip this tale to avoid the possible protests, not only from child advocates, but also from animal rights folks. That poor ram!

And then, on top of that, what does this story say about Father Abraham, that he would even think of sacrificing his son, even if God asked him? That's not the kind of leap of faith that I'm interested in. And what does it say about God that God would even ask such a thing of any parent? Is that what faith demands? That's not the God I know.

But for me, bringing this story back into the light is worth it. For one thing, it's not going anywhere. It's carved right over there. And it goes deeper than that. This story is in the bedrock of our history with God, and also of the history of the Jews and the Muslims, too. Two billion people, at the moment, proclaim themselves as the children of Abraham, the inheritors of this story.

But we can't just take it at face value. We have to do some more investigation. It's in places like St. Bart's that we encourage the people of God not to take the Bible literally. But with a story like this, one so suspenseful and vivid, it's difficult to see anything but the surface.

So let's take a step back and look at this from a few more vantage points. First off, "Abraham" could easily be a condensation of multiple generations of the early Israelites into one person. Or he could have been a historical figure, with a heaping helping of legend in the telling. But no matter what, "Abraham" happened. "Abraham" in Genesis represents a very real process in our faith where the truth about God is worked out in a radical new way.

If we look at the time of Abraham, we find that nearly everyone, everyone back in Mesopotamia which he left behind, everyone in his time believed that God, or any god among many, was a severe and demanding deity, one that would give blessings and forgiveness if you sacrificed what meant the most to you. And that common logic of the day would often lead to your child's being that most cherished object. It was tragically standard in the ancient world for someone to lead their child up a mountain to be sacrificed to his god. A kind of waking nightmare of faith. What was extraordinary was for someone to wake up from that common nightmare and come down the mountain with their child still alive. Now, imagine how hard it would be to be the first person, the first family, to question such a basic belief, the framework of society. Imagine the courage to suggest to people that they had been wrong all along. That their children didn't have to die in God's name.

"But Matthew," you say, "I heard the story. It was God who asked him to go up that mountain in the first place!" Well, on the surface, yes. But if you go deeper, there is an amazing clue in the text, something you can only see in the original Hebrew. The word for "God" in the start of the story, the "God" who tells Abraham to sacrifice his son, that word is *Elohim*. This is the oldest word we have for God in the Bible. But here's the thing: *Elohim* is also the word used to talk about all gods, even the other *false* gods. When the First Commandment says, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me," *Elohim* is the word for *gods*. *Elohim* is the figure that "tests" or "tempts" Abraham to do the status quo in religion. And Abraham goes along with this for a time. But when God says something different, something new, it is from an angel of *Yahweh*, this newer name of God, the name that Moses will hear from the Burning Bush, a name so special that Jews to this day do not say it out loud. They replace it with another name, *Adonai*. *Yahweh* is the one who says, "Let my people go!" to Moses, undermining the whole religious logic of slavery. And *Yahweh* is the one who says to Abraham, "Let Isaac go!" And in that, *Yahweh* begins to undermine another cruel logic.

Unfortunately the storyteller of Genesis doesn't go as far as we would like in parsing this out. But thanks be to God that Abraham was able to parse out that new voice from all the other older voices. Thanks be to God that he was able to hear it in time, before the knife fell.

This was the epic breakthrough of the Israelites. As Abraham's children, they began to work out a life in which they trusted that God did not demand their children's sacrifice. This was a huge part of how they distinguished themselves from other people, like the Canaanites. This is the first glimpse of that new way. Imperfect, yes, for sacrifice isn't abandoned. The child is replaced by that poor ram. Unfortunately, that substitution was as far as Abraham could be stretched in his day. But over the generations, you see this development, two steps forward, one step back, where God's people begin to see that God doesn't even want the burnt offerings of animals or even plants. The prophet Hosea would hit the nail on the head centuries later by proclaiming that what God wants from us is "mercy, not sacrifice." This story, the Binding and Unbinding of Isaac, represents the first in-breaking of this spiritual truth. It's thanks to Abraham that we, today, have the capacity to look at this story with such disgust. This is the wisdom of the children of Abraham in action.

I think this is the "prophet's reward" that Jesus was talking about in our Gospel for today: The reward of the realization that God could never need anything like that *from* us, because God provides everything *for* us. And God isn't the one who is angry and hostile and needs appeasement. We are the angry ones! We are the ones who project that anger into heaven, and we often get away with it! Our hostile, bloodthirsty hearts and institutions are the ones that need to be changed. We might have a problem offering up our children to an angry god. Yet we may have an easier time sacrificing our children to our ideals or, should I say, idols. These collective visions that we have might as well be a pantheon of gods, the way we behave towards them. We can sacrifice our children to ideals of Beauty and Achievement. We have offered them up to Lady Justice, filling our prisons with her mandatory sentences, devoid of mercy. How many have been lost to a vision of Foreign Policy? How many have been lost to our reverence for Firearms? How many have been killed for Peace? Can we even bear to see the irony there? And then there is the Ideal of Gender, so many lost to a tragically limited grasp of it. It's on days like today that we try to find pride and joy amidst all the wreckage that has been caused by that false Ideal of Gender, constraining who can do what, who can love whom, and who can represent God. And so out there and in here we march to exalt the truth under God, a truth that can be so difficult to distinguish from the countless voices, in pandemonium, that are crying out for bloody justice and sacrifice to keep false ideals alive, merciless ideals that, if we let them, would consume even those closest to us. It is in the cacophony that we seek the still small voice of God that cries out for mercy for all. For friends and enemies. A voice that cries out to unbind them and let them go. Maybe we should be easier on

Abraham. Our temptations are perhaps not as dramatic as Abraham's was. But they are there. Maybe we should be looking to Abraham for guidance, for he was the first to drop the knife, the one who heard the still small voice of mercy before it was too late.

So let's not cover this up. Let's not forget it. Our inheritance as children of Abraham still has a ways to mature, even to this day. May we, in all things, strive for that legacy to grow in our lives, a divine legacy of mercy instead of sacrifice. A divine calling out of death into life.

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