

“The Demanding Covenant”

Genesis 22:1-18; Romans 12:1-8

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Do you like to go camping? I do, but I don't do it near enough. Because, in the end, it is a lot of trouble, isn't it? After all, it takes a lot of effort to get all the equipment, the food, find a good place, all those things one must do to experience the close beauty of the natural world. A few years ago, the Travel section of Newsweek Magazine had an article called “Great Views, Less Sweat” in which they talked about the growing number of companies that advertise a new style of backpacking and camping. Now you still have to do the actual walking, but for a price the company will carry all the equipment, set up camp, do the cooking. This way you get to enjoy all the pleasures of the great outdoors without any of the inconveniences.”¹ Doesn't that sound great? You get the joy of seeing some of the great wonders of the world as you hike through the Colorado mountains or the islands of British Columbia or Glacier Park in Montana, but you don't have to worry about starting a fire when it has rained that afternoon or finding a flat place to pitch your tent or putting up with freeze dried food in the wilderness. All that is taken care of for you. It's sort of Camping or Backpacking Lite.

Sometimes I wonder if we do that with our faith. I'm afraid that we try to create a Church Lite or Christianity Lite. We want to make it easy to be Christian. We want to make church membership easy. We don't want to make faith inconvenient for anyone. You can come to worship and participate in a few activities here or there, whatever strikes your interest, but you don't *have to*. But certainly, we don't want to do anything that will make people feel uncomfortable or make them think that if they are in the church or if they become Christian that it will mean their lives will actually change or anything. We

1 “Great Views, Less Sweat.” Newsweek, June 28, 2004. P. 57

don't want church to be difficult. But this passage from Genesis 22 and Paul's words from Romans 12, tell a different kind of story.

Genesis 22 is a bothersome kind of story. I hope it bothers you, it does me. It has bothered many people, Christians, Jews and Muslims, for thousands of years. It seems to be a very cruel story, one that I wish we could explain away, saying that perhaps it never really happened, and maybe it didn't. But what does this story say about our friend Abraham? He has waited all his life to have a family, to have a son. And he had been promised a son with Sarah and that son was supposed to be the beginning of a great nation, a blessing for the entire world. Finally, Isaac comes along in Abraham's old age and Abraham believes that God is one who can be trusted, who cares, who fulfills his promises. Then comes this story. Abraham is called to take his son Isaac and offer him up as a sacrifice. He is told to take his son, go to the top of the mountain, lay him down on an altar of wood and kill him and then burn the remains as an offering to God. What kind of God would ask for that? What kind of father would do that? Traditionally there are a couple of explanations for this story. The first is that this is a test. The very first verse says that this is a way that God is testing the faith of Abraham. See, this story isn't so bad. God never really intended for Abraham to kill Isaac, but he needed to test his faith. Don't we need tests in our lives? We test to show whether or not a person is really ready for a task. We don't just hand out driver's licenses to teenagers, do we? We give them a test, usually more than one, before we let them out on the public roads with a car. Don't we have test for doctors to make sure they know what they are doing before they operate? Or for lawyers before they can practice law? We even have tests for Presbyterian ministers before we let them take responsibility for a congregation and preach and teach and administer the sacraments. Would you want to be operated on by a doctor who had never been tested to see if he or she really knows how to do the operation that you need? Of course not. We need to test each other. Doesn't God need to test us? Don't we need to be tested to see if our faith is real? But Abraham has already been tested already, right? He was asked to leave his home in

Haran, to leave his family, to travel to a new land that he has never seen and go settle someplace new, all because God told him to. Wasn't that being tested? And he passed. So, what is God doing now? Isn't this just cruel?

Others have said that this is a story about the outlawing of human sacrifice. Verses 11-13 show a change at the last minute, Isaac is spared and a ram is sacrificed instead of the boy. Many have used this change to say that this indicates a change in the culture, that this is an example to Abraham. This is a story that reflects the culture of the day. Outside of Abraham, outside of Israel in later years, child sacrifice was often part of various ancient Near East religious rituals. Those who heard this story in later years when Israel was a nation would know that. One of the Canaanite deities was the god Molech who was probably the god of the underworld. It was common practice among some of the Canaanite tribes that the first child born to a family was sacrificed to Molech. If other nations did that, why not Israel? The religious leaders of Israel could point to this story, that God had stopped Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, therefore God commands that the peoples stop all such sacrifices. So actually, this is a kind, compassionate story outlawing that barbaric practice, right? But it doesn't feel that way, does it? Couldn't God just say, no more human sacrifice? Does he have to put Abraham and Isaac through this big test?

This story is not really about human sacrifice, rather it is about a *human's* sacrifice. It's not really about the sacrifice of Isaac, it's about Abraham's sacrifice. What God wants from Abraham is not Isaac's death but Abraham's heart. The question this story raises is whether or not Abraham is willing to give up that one thing that is most precious to him, that one thing that is most important to him above all other things, whether he can give that one thing to God. Do you remember the movie "City Slickers" with Billy Crystal and Jack Palance? Crystal plays a New Yorker who has come to a ranch in New Mexico for a week on a dude ranch, to have the experience of being a cowboy for just a little while. Jack Palance

plays Curly, the hard, sometimes ruthless trail boss. At one point Crystal's character is talking with Curly and Curly says that he doesn't understand these easterners who come west and in a week, expect to discover the meaning of life. Crystal asks if he knows the meaning of life. Curly holds up one finger and says, "it's this." Crystal, confused, says "your finger?" No, it this, one thing. What's that one thing? That's what you have to decide, says Curly. One thing. Maybe that's what God is doing here. Finding that one thing. What's that one thing that God might ask us to give up for him?

God wants our hearts before our sacrifices. God wants to know if we understand divine gifts as pure gifts, not as possessions or entitlements. We so easily turn gifts into idols. God gives up possessions and we idolize them. God gives us work and we worship it. God gives us the love of another person and we make it into the end-all and call it romance. If anything, no matter how good it is, comes between us and God, it becomes an idol. In this story, we see that God calls us to let go of our most cherished gifts and trust him to provide. The message of Genesis 22 is shocking, but not because of allusion to child sacrifice. It is shocking because of the demands it places on us. God is not only a giving God but also a demanding God. God does test us in a way. There are situations in our lives that make us question what is most important. No person, no possession, no dream, no career can stand between us and God. Somewhere along life's journey God asks each of us what that one thing is, is there something that stands between us and God?

We have said in our discussion about covenant that often the covenants we make with God tell us more about God than they do about us. We have seen that God is a God of love and care for the whole world, for each person in the world, and a God of faith and hope. But he is also a demanding God. This is what we often avoid in church and try to present Church Lite or Christianity Lite—a faith or religion that doesn't really demand anything of us. The theologian Dallas Willard says that we are developing a generic brand of "undisciplined disciples." In this brand of discipleship, giving becomes a mathematical

equation not a heartfelt offering. Prayer becomes an issue of time management instead of a spiritual quest to know God. Serving others is an opportunity to put another notch on the spiritual belt, rather than a deeply embedded desire to serve God. Worship becomes entertainment of myself rather than praise of the creator. Christianity lite—faith without discipleship.

A number of years ago Millard Fuller spoke to a group of college students at Duke University. He told them about how he and his wife prayerfully decided to sell everything they had, leave a successful law practice, move to a poor neighborhood in Americus, Georgia, and serve the poor in that community. They started building houses for poor people, and Habitat for Humanity was born. After Fuller spoke on that occasion, several people in the audience inquired about the Fuller's children: how old were they when they moved to Georgia, and how did the move affect them? Did the Fullers really consider their children's needs when they made this decision? Behind the questions was this concern: it is fine if people want to make a sacrifice for a religious commitment, but it's not fine to drag their children along, uproot their lives, and sacrifice them for the sake of their parents' values. But isn't that the irony? Don't all parents, by the way they live, sacrifice their children to their own values? Should we sacrifice them to a culture of pleasure seeking, or success, or social standing? Or do we show them by the way we live that there is nothing that comes between us and God?²

The story of Abraham's sacrifice is an extremely difficult story to hear because it stands at odds with contemporary spirituality that emphasizes what God can do for us. This story is about what God demands of us. That's why we included Paul's words today: I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." Our God is a demanding God. He demands us. He demands that nothing come between us and him. This story uncomfortably reminds us that we belong to God, but he does not belong to us. He has made us and we are his, as the psalm goes. And as the old catechism

reminds us, our one comfort in life and death is that we belong not to ourselves but to our faithful savior
Jesus Christ who loved us and gave himself for us.