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The National Presbyterian Church

## Our Father Abraham (Good News By Surprise)

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Genesis 22; Romans 4:1-3

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**W**e meet the father Abraham in the twelfth chapter of the book of Genesis. He hears a promise that begins the story of preparation for the grand story. He's living in ancient Babylon where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers come together, and he hears a promise from God. The promise is that Abraham is to go west, and establish a people. Now the Lord said to Abraham, "Go from your country and your kindred, your father's house, to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing" (Genesis 12:1-2). That's how we first meet Abraham.

Abraham will have two sons. The first, the son of Abraham and Hagar, is Ishmael, who becomes the father of the Arabs. That son receives a blessing from God. And the second son, his younger son, Isaac, is the son of Abraham and Sarah. He becomes the father of the Jews. Both of these young men are circumcised by the command of God as a sign, a covenant sign.

Ishmael is circumcised when he is thirteen years old, and that's why Muslim boys are circumcised on the thirteenth year of their life. Isaac is circumcised on his eighth day of life, and that's why Jewish boys are circumcised on the eighth day of their life, as a mark of the covenant of the promise that God gives.

According to St. Paul in Romans chapter four, we gentiles, when we hear and believe the Good News, then we also are named as children of Abraham, and we also have the mark of the covenant, too. For us the mark of water is put on us in our baptism. One of the reasons we baptize infants in the Christian church is because the New Testament church sees baptism as the fulfillment of that first mark of the covenant. On the eighth day of boy's life, when he's a young boy; but, as Paul says in Galatians, "Now there is neither male nor female" (Galatians 3:28). And so this promise is made to men and women, boys and girls. So we receive the mark of baptism as the sign of the fulfillment of that covenant. In baptism we lay hold of that promise.

Abraham's life story is an uneven story. You can read it in the early chapters of Genesis. There are times that he has strong faith, and there are times when he is disobedient and weak. But in chapter 22, he faces the most harrowing moment in his whole life – both of his life and the life of his youngest son, Isaac. The 22nd chapter of Genesis tells that account.

*After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, Abraham, and he said, "Here I am." And he said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac whom you love. Go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering to one the mountains that I will show you." So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, took two of his young men with him, and his son, Isaac. He cut the wood for the burnt offering; he 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 off. 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." (Genesis 22:4-5).*

That's an odd sentence in light of this test. But that's what he says, verse five. "We will come back."

*Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son, Isaac, and then he himself carried the fire and the knife, and so the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, 'Father?' and he said, 'Here am I, my son.' He said, 'The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?' And 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 them, Abraham built an altar, laid the wood in the altar, bound his son, Isaac, 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 you fear God since you did not withhold your son.' And Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught in a thicket by his horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it 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'. (Genesis 22:6-14)*

What do we do with this text? How do we understand this test? How do we make sense of it in the light of all that's going to happen in this story before the grand story? Abraham and Isaac are trudging up Mount Moriah and in a way, their trudging up Mount Moriah can be seen as acting out a typical religious practice that was common in the world of their time. It is a horrible thing, but child sacrifice was practiced throughout all the ancient Mediterranean world, with the exception of the Jews, in that time. Historians know all about it. It was called Molech. Ancient gods required it, the Mesopotamian gods required it. It was practiced widely.

And so in a way, it might be that as Abraham is trudging up Mount Mo-

riah with his son, Isaac, he might be tempted to say, "I knew it might come to this. I wondered when it might happen that what all the other gods require, maybe the God who called me at Ur, at the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, and sent me on my mission, and gave me all of those promises, that he would make the same request of me that they do." And so the walk up that, up that mountain, trudging up that mountain is a dire moment for Abraham and Isaac too. This willingness of Abraham shouldn't be glorified. We shouldn't glorify the fact that Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son. Everybody else did it. All the other ancient people did it, though not the Jews. Except for one king, Ahab. Ahab, because of his wife, Jezebel, who worshipped the Baal gods, practiced child sacrifice. And it's called in the Old Testament, an abomination. Ahab is called the worst of all the kings because he practiced child sacrifice, which was against the will of God.

Well where did the idea come from that it was against the will of God? It may be this very moment. Abraham trudging up Moriah doesn't know that history yet. He's climbing up that mountain perhaps thinking, this is just what every other god expects. Maybe it's come to that for me. This is possible except for two sentences that Abraham says. Two mysterious sentences. And one sentence he says to his servants, he said, "Wait here with the donkey, my son and I are going up the mountain to worship and we will come back." That is one strange sentence. He used the plural. "We'll come back." How could that be in light of the test that Abraham knows about?

The second thing is, when his son says, "Where's the lamb? We have the wood, we have the fire, where's the lamb?" And Abraham says to his son, "The Lord will provide." He says that. I wonder if Abraham half knows something as he goes up the mountain, which perhaps makes all the difference in understanding this great text. Does he half know something? He doesn't know everything. You know, you never know everything in your life's journey. You know parts of things. But does he know something half way, so that he would say these two things? Well let's see what he does know.

Abraham knows two things as they face this test. First, he knows that he's being tested. He knows that. But he knows two other things as well. He knows two things about God. First, that God had made a promise to him. God had made a promise first when he called him and promised to bless him, and bless the whole world through him. And then he made a promise when Isaac was born that through Isaac the world would be blessed as well. So Abraham remembers that promise. Is that what he half knows and now he decides to claim? And secondly he has already experienced the kindness of God in connection with the birth of Ishmael.

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Remember, Ishmael's mother was the servant of Sarah, and when Sarah could not conceive, Abraham had a son through Hagar. And when Sarah realized that Hagar was pregnant, she persecuted Hagar, actually wanted to kill her. So she was sent out into the desert to die, but God found her and protected her. And that act of kindness toward Hagar, and because of it at the birth of Ishmael, Abraham calls this boy's name Ishmael. The word Ishmael means "God hears." God hears us. God is aware of us. And that's what he names the boy.

So Abraham has had an experience of the kindness of God in the way God treated Ishmael and Hagar and the way he treated and gave a promise to Ishmael, and also that's why Ishmael is also circumcised, with the promise. He and his mother, Hagar, are protected by God. So could it be that these two experiences, the experience of promise and the experience of the kindness of God's character that he already knows, prepares Abraham to expect that something new would happen on that mountain, that something would be different than what was happening among all the other ancient religions of his time. And it did. It did!

On Mount Moriah an interruption occurs. Because of that divine interruption we know that the big event on Mount Moriah is not that a man was willing to sacrifice a boy. The big event on Mount Moriah was that Abraham was interrupted by God, who did not want that sacrifice. That's the big event on Mount Moriah, not Abraham trudging up the mountain, but God interrupting a terrible act in Abraham's favor and in favor of this boy,

Isaac. God provides his own sacrifices.

And never again will Abraham or his people or anyone ever be expected to sacrifice their children to God. And maybe in a way God allowed that test to happen so it would be forever wiped out of the life and journey and faith experience of his people. It's not to be a part of their worship. Something new is going to happen. So in this event on Mount Moriah, we experience the beginnings of the Gospel of redemption because of Another who takes our place. St. Paul interprets it that way. In chapter four when he tells us that we are also children of Abraham because it was Abraham's faith that gave him righteousness: "Abraham hoped against hope" (Romans 4:18) – that's the way Paul puts it – that God would not go back on his promise. That's an interesting way Paul puts it. And so because of the faith of Abraham, all who have faith are children of Abraham, therefore Paul's inclusion now of all who believe as children of Abraham, along with Ishmael and Isaac. Paul later continues, "It was reckoned to him, was written not only for his sake but for ours. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus, our Lord, from the dead" (Romans 4:23-24). See, he was the sacrifice that Abraham doesn't have any way of knowing about now. But God will provide his own sacrifice at Mount Calvary where our Lord will actually absorb sin and death and the power of evil, and will take it, and because of that we are set free.

At the end of Romans chapter four, Paul puts it this way. "He was handed over to death for our trespasses, and he was raised for our justification." And then listen to this next line from St. Paul: "Therefore, since we are justified by faith we have peace with God" (Romans 5:1). You know, Abraham and Isaac trudged up Mount Moriah, but they ran down Mount Moriah. They ran with joy down Mount Moriah. We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ through whom we have obtained this access to grace, God's grace. That's the big event on Mount Moriah.

Brothers and sisters, when you and I face a tough time in our lives, what do we do? Or maybe a time when we feel we are being tested, who knows

by who? When we are feeling that we're tested, remember what we already know. Remember the great facts. I believe that's what made the difference for Abraham going up Mount Moriah so that he's not just a religious figure going up that mountain. And that's why he says, "We'll come back." Does he suspect something? We're coming back, and God will provide. He does say that.

Rembrandt van Rijn is, I believe, the greatest interpreter of the Bible of any artist. Rembrandt painted many scenes from the Bible. And one scene he painted is the sacrifice of Isaac. It is one of his great paintings. But are you aware that when he painted great scenes like this one from the Bible, he would often copy what other painters had done earlier, but then he would improve their interpretation in his own painting. One example is his, "Storm on the Sea of Galilee;"<sup>1</sup> another painter had done a storm on the Lake of Galilee. Rembrandt saw it, liked it, and then he did it very similarly, and yet he made marvelous changes so that Rembrandt's painting is much greater than the one he copied from. The same thing is true of the "Sacrifice of Isaac." In 1630, a man named Pieter Lastman did a painting, "Sacrifice of Isaac." Rembrandt saw it. And so in 1634 Rembrandt did his painting, "Sacrifice of Abraham,"<sup>2</sup> but he made changes. And the changes make Rembrandt's painting amazing compared to Lastman's. Lastman has the father, Abraham, holding the knife in his hand about to slay his son, and an angel is wrestling with Abraham at that moment. Rembrandt looked at that painting and must have said, 'I will paint that scene, too. Pieter Lastman did it, I'm going to do it, too.' But Rembrandt's painting is different. Rembrandt's painting is sheer Gospel. Here's Rembrandt's painting: the father is standing, the boy is on the altar, the father's knife is there. But Rembrandt, instead of having the angel wrestle with Abraham to get the knife away, (almost as if the father wanted to do the religious act and the angel had to fight against him for it) Rembrandt portrays in his painting, the very moment that the angel touches the father's hand, and the knife is being thrown away, his hand is empty. He has already thrown the knife away. Abraham hopes that God's going to do something new. And the moment the angel touches him, the father says "I knew it," and there goes the knife,

thrown away in sheer wonder and grace. That's Gospel.

God doesn't want you to hurt anybody. He doesn't want you to hurt your children. He wants you to love your children. He loves your children more than you do, and that signal is given to Abraham. We can never forget it. There is Good News in this scene because of the interruption. Heavenly Father, thank you for this text. Thank you that it takes us by surprise. It's terrifying to read it, until we realize this amazing breakthrough. The breakthrough of Good News when we may not have expected it, or didn't know how to expect it, and yet there it is -- because of your kindness, and because of your promise. Lord, help us to claim your promise and claim your kindness when we face stresses, too. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.

1 "The Storm on the Sea of Galilee," by Rembrandt van Rijn, 1633.

2 "Sacrifice of Abraham," by Rembrandt van Rijn, 1634.

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*Sunday Worship at 8, 9:15 & 11 a.m.*  
*Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.*

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