

"I D E N T I T Y"

Text: Gen. 12:1-3, Gen. 22:1-8

A Sermon Preached at Union Church of Manila

on May 18, 1969

by

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A few miles from Seattle, Washington, is a little resort town called Seabeck. One hundred years ago it was a vigorous lumber and shipbuilding town but now only a few Summer vacation cottages remain, and a YMCA camp is located at the site of the original town. On one occasion during a high school retreat that we were having there, one of the teenagers found in the area an old wooden grave marker that he had found toppled over in some underbrush. It read: "Buried here is Richard Howell, age about 23, killed in a dispute October 11, 1887." Who is this young man Richard Howell? Where is he from? Who are his parents? Does he have a sweetheart? What triggered the dispute? Probably no one at Seabeck really knew the young Howell boy in 1887. He had drifted into Seabeck like a lot of other men to get a job in the woods or on the sea. Richard Howell lived and died with a form of anonymity that haunts us in a different and more subtle form today to a greater extent than it did then. The crisis in identity is one of the chief issues of our time. What is identity? How do I get it? When is it counterfeit? When is it real? How do I keep hold of it?

The first great theme of the Old Testament is the gift of identity. In fact, this theme continues on throughout the whole of the Old and New Testaments in what theologians call the holy history of God's chosen people. It all begins with the call of Abraham in about the year 1800 B.C. Abraham is a cultured man; he comes from a great city in old Babylon, a city that has existed for 1000 years before the strange event recorded in Chapter 12 of Genesis.

"Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And 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. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves.'"

Verses 1-3

These few sentences mark the beginning of the people of Israel; they will always be called the chosen people from this moment onward, their identity sealed for them in the fact of this chosen-ness. Abraham obeys the call; he journeys toward the Mediterranean and establishes his claim upon the land of the Jordan River. Of all of the events of Abraham's life, one of them is the most significant. At the very height of this great nomad's life, Abraham's God asks him to take his son Isaac to Mt. Moriah and there to sacrifice his son as an offering to the Lord.

"After these things God tested Abraham, and said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here am I.' 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 upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.' So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; and he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On

the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place afar off. Then Abraham said to his young men, 'Stay here with the ass; I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you.' And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it on Isaac his son; and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, 'My father!' And he said, 'Here am I, my son.' He said, 'Behold, the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?' Abraham said, 'God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.' So they went both of them together."

- Genesis 22: 1-8

This incredible event in the life of Abraham takes on tremendous importance as the understanding of all of the most vital themes of the Bible provided the event is rightly understood.

There are two ways to look at the event:

(1) The one view sees the Mt. Moriah experience primarily as a decisive proof of the tremendous faith that Abraham had in God. In other words, Abraham was being tested by the command to sacrifice his son Isaac in order to establish whether his faith were strong and complete; the old man endured the test. The problem in this view is that God becomes grotesque to us in posing such a choice for Abraham in the first place.

(2) The second understanding of Mt. Moriah sees something totally different in the event. First of all it is essential to understand something about the time in which Abraham lived. Human sacrifice was common among all of the nations of the Middle East during Abraham's time and for many years afterward as well; this practice was called "Molech." Therefore, Abraham probably thought of God's command in the light of the context of 1800 B. C. "Ah, the God who called me at the Ur of Chaldees is now going to ask of me the same symbol of devotion that all of the other gods do. I must reject my individual self and the son who is the extension of my own selfhood and then I will find identity." Abraham was hurt and angry but philosophic regarding the request that he knew in his bones sooner or later was coming. Every other god asks for human sacrifice -- why not his God. Have you ever thought of the fact that many social and religious movements to this day ask for the same -- the sacrifice of individual identity and individual particular worth so that the true believer may find identity in the "Party" or in the nation or the cause. But the point is this: Abraham had reason to expect this terrible command. "Go to Moriah and there offer your son Isaac..." because all religious and political systems of his generation made exactly the same request. Therefore, we ought not to use this willingness to sacrifice human life as a sign of great faith -- grief, morbid resignation, yes, faith no! The faith of Abraham is revealed in the three words that he speaks to his young son when Isaac asks what shall be the sacrifice: His father answers, "God will provide." There is Abraham's faith; it is his earnest hope that somehow the God of his journey will be different than the little gods of the ancient world.

What is the true importance of Mt. Moriah? Something of far greater significance than the proof of Abraham's faith is taking place. At just the moment that the old father is about to destroy all that he loves, the God who called him now intervenes in one dramatic interruption of human religion. This radical intervention at Mt. Moriah is the greatest event in Abraham's life: the gift of the grace of God. God provides his own sacrifices and no man need ever again prove human devotion by slaying himself or his sons. Abraham receives his identity and that

of his son as a gift, no strings attached.

Up until now Abraham has obeyed the god of authority who called him to follow, but now in his old age he meets the God of love who cares for him as a person. Mt. Moriah is the beginning of a new order: Abraham on the way up to Mt. Moriah is a typical religious figure, performing a typical religious act: intensely painful and degrading. He is like many men who have made great sacrifices to please God. But, Abraham descends Mt. Moriah a new man, no longer typically religious because God has interrupted Abraham and religion too.

We live on this side of Mt. Moriah and we must never forget it! In the Holy Bible from this moment on the strongest theme will be not Abraham's great obedience to hard commands but God's great love. In this moment we have discovered that "the omnipotence of God and the grace of God are the same thing." (Karl Barth) Total power and total love have been united. Abraham trudged up the hill obeying God; he came down the hill knowing God and knowing how very much he, the man Abraham and his little son Isaac are worth. Here is a new basis for identity; "I am what I am by the grace of God," therefore, I will neither overrate nor underrate my own existence.

We live on this side of Mt. Moriah; thank God! Therefore, we shall never be asked to sacrifice anything but our hearts given in gratitude. The test is over; the matter is settled. In a very profound sense, Mt. Moriah was needed to really make the point clear. God must take Abraham through the context of his own age in order to bring him beyond it. This is the deep theological reason for the incarnation itself. God must journey with us through the historical situation within which we actually live in order to set us free from its bondage and emptiness.

One of the gravest tragedies for men is the "pre-Moriah" mentality that many people live with. They think that God is continually testing and tempting their daily lives in one way or another to check out the sincerity of their faith, as if God would in such a way confirm the worth of his servant, but this is faulty doctrine and it produces two bad results in our lives:

(1) It leads us to adopt a morose frame of mind in which we look for and expect various terrible tests to strike us at any moment. I have counselled people who have fearfully confided in me that they even fear their own happiness: "we are so happy right now, I just know that God will in some way take part of it away from us to test our faith..." What a tragic way to live; what a complete misunderstanding of the message of Mt. Moriah.

(2) A second bad result that often follows is the conviction that we, like Abraham, will need to achieve some brave deed or act to really seal our genuineness. No! These are false goals and they disregard the victory of that windswept hill on the great ridge above Jordan, the victory made final and total just one mile to the west of Moriah on another hill - Golgotha. Abraham's gift was sealed and made universal at Mt. Calvary in the death of our Lord Jesus Christ. The only one who will make the sacrifice is God Himself and in that sacrifice we are redeemed and in this holy gift we receive the two-fold basis of our identity from the Biblical point of view: our identity first of all rests in being called - named - chosen - as Abraham was at the Ur of Chaldees. This is part of the meaning of Christian baptism and why it is that in baptism (like circumcision in the Old Testament) a man gains his "Christian" name -- that is to say, his unique worth and identity before God and history. The second source of our identity is in redemption on Mt. Moriah and Mt. Calvary when God takes the unconditional responsibility for our lives, he makes the sacrifice to cover our sins, to resolve our crises and in this we gain an even deeper ground beneath our individual selfhood.

I once heard a story of a boy who had built a model sailing boat. It was seaworthy and he was very proud of it. Unfortunately one afternoon he was sailing it in Central Park in New York City and a brisk wind took it beyond his reach so that by the time he circled the lake to find it, the boat had vanished. Each day during that summer he would return to the lake hoping that perhaps someone had returned it to the park police. One afternoon he walked passed a pawn shop and saw his boat in the window. He ran in to find out the price and begged the shopkeeper to save it. Finally, he came back with the money, bought the ship and as he walked out of the door he said, "Little boat, you are mine now in two ways: I made you and I bought you."

This is the first message of the Bible.