

Series: Abraham's Altars
Sermon: Altar of Providence

Genesis 22:1-18

Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied.

2 Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you."

3 Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. 4 On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. 5 He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you."

6 Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, 7 Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?"

"Yes, my son?" Abraham replied.

"The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

8 Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together.

9 When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. 10 Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. 11 But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied.

12 "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."

13 Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. 14 So Abraham called that place The Lord Will Provide. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided."

15 The angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven a second time 16 and said, "I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, 17 I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, 18 and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."

Sermon

The pioneers who settled the American West often had to travel for days at a time across miles and miles of grassy plains. And while pioneers considered mountain ranges difficult and treacherous to cross, they dreaded these vast plains even more. It wasn't the hostile Indians, prairie wolves, rattlesnakes or summer heat that caused their fear. It was lightning. The high grass on the plains was often so dry that lightning could ignite a small fire that could then be whipped up by the winds and spread quickly across the land, engulfing anything and everything and everyone in its path. Many died on their journeys across the plains simply because they were unable to outrun a raging prairie fire. After many tragic journeys, the pioneers developed a method of finding refuge from these fires that is still used today. Whenever they saw smoke from a lightning fire in the distance, they would do the unthinkable. If you were about to be fried to death because of a fire, what's the last thing you'd do? Build a fire. They discovered that if they went downwind from their wagons and set the plains on fire, that particular fire would go downwind of their wagons. Once that grass was burned, they would then move their horses and wagons across the scorched land. When the fire from the lightning did reach them, they were safe because there was no longer any grass to be burned. The pioneers did the unthinkable and found safety fighting fire by starting a fire.

We have the unthinkable in this morning's scripture lesson. It is the story of Abraham's close call sacrifice of his son, Isaac. The story of Abraham takes place in the Book of Genesis. His is the first story after what they call the pre-history: Adam and Eve, the flood, the tower of Babel. The rest of Genesis is the story of a family through four Generations - Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel, finishing with the story of Joseph. Many of the stories we know from our Sunday School days come from these people. Abraham is considered the father of our faith - because he is the first patriarch in the succession. God also gives Abraham several promises in return for his faithfulness. Abraham is promised offspring, as numerous as the stars. He is promised land, a nation in which to live. He is also promised honor, as his name will be called great, and all people will be blessed by him. All of this, in return for obedience and reverence. Today, Abraham is known as the father of three major faiths, constituting more than half of the world's population. The Muslims revere him, the Christians praise him and the Jews honor him. In practical terms, Abraham is the beginning of these faiths, the person with whom worship and discipleship began.

The lesson we have in front of us is one in which I am kind of nervous about preaching. From my Sunday School days, I remember seeing a picture of the story in a book with Abraham and Isaac on the mountain top and Isaac bound and his father above him with a knife. It was a scary picture for a child. It's a haunting thought for an adult who is a parent. To be honest, I've never heard a sermon on the story of Abraham and Isaac, and probably for good reason. It's a text that does not lend itself to a theme like "love of God", "Finding God's will", "How to be a better Christian" or other such topics. Don't ever preach on this. If you ever want to hear about certain stories or topics, please let me know and we'll fit them into our Sunday morning schedule. Of course, now that I have kids of my own, this particular story takes on a little more meaning. As always, the views and opinions expressed from the pulpit are mine. I encourage you to think about these stories and come to your own conclusions, but hopefully my messages can help you shape and form your own ideas.

Abraham was old, over a hundred in fact. Sarah was roughly the same age. God had promised the couple a child in their old years, and generations to follow. Isaac came to pass. Isaac means "to laugh" in Hebrew, which they named him because God had given them a new found happiness. When Isaac was a little older, his father had another encounter with God. This meeting, however, would not end in laughter. God called out to Abraham and Abraham responded, "Here I am." And then God told him to do the unthinkable. "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love. And sacrifice him on a mountaintop." The story doesn't give us any other words from Abraham in the conversation. I don't know if I could come up with any if I was in the same situation. Only tears could I afford. But I know once the shock wore off, I would be pleading, begging, arguing, and down right refusing. But I'm not Abraham. The next day, Abraham saddled his donkey and took his son on a trip. I have a hunch that Abraham didn't tell Sarah where he was going. Just a guess. On the third day, they

reached the mountain that God had mentioned. While they climbed the mountain, leaving the servants behind, Isaac asked the logical question. He was carrying the wood, his father the knife and flame and there was nothing to be sacrificed. "Father, where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" That would have to reach into the heart of the father, Oh, the suffering that Abraham probably was bearing! I felt bad for my kids when they were babies when it was time for their shots at the doctor's office, and I can't explain to them why someone is hurting him. I can't imagine what went through Abraham's mind. Abraham answered the best he could, "God will provide the sacrifice" which in essence, was true. God gave him his son. Isaac watched his father build an altar and stack the wood. I cannot imagine the horrible feeling that Abraham had when he had to grab his son and bind him up. Not only would it be the death of his son, but it was his only child. This would be the death of the promise that God had given Abraham. Remember? The descendants as numerous as the sand or the stars? With the death of your only son, all of that goes out the window. With this sacrifice, God is renegeing on his pledge, on his promise. What kind of God would give you something and then take it away shortly after? The future hinges on this boy, Isaac. Without him, Abraham is the father of nobody. At the last possible moment, when the knife was in the air, an Angel of God stopped the hand of Abraham. "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son." And a ram was seen caught in a thicket and Abraham sacrificed the ram in the place of his son. The Angel called down a second time and renewed God's pledge of numerous generations, land, and blessings in return for Abraham's obedience.

It is still a story that I cannot fathom. God telling Abraham to kill his only son - for no apparent purpose other than sacrifice! If I were Abraham, I would plead to spare his life. And I don't know if I could do it. Take my life instead. I would gladly give my life rather than to take my son's life. I'll put that into a different, more contemporary context. I'm stealing this from a Christian speaker I once heard. If this building caught on fire, I honestly believe that I would help someone out, and then come back and help someone else out, and then come back, time and time again - I would put my life on the line to save any one of you. On most Sundays. But not this Sunday. Because my children are here. As much as I'm willing to give my life to save yours, I won't give their life for yours. I refuse. This morning, you'd better have the exits marked out on your own. And then I look at our scripture again. I've discovered, at it's core, this story it is not about sacrifice. This story is not about a mean God asking Abraham to do the unthinkable. God wasn't playing a cruel trick on Abraham. It's about faithfulness, it's about obedience. It's about idols. I'll talk more about idols in a second. God wanted to test Abraham to see if Abraham was faithful. And he took the most precious thing, the one thing that mattered most to Abraham to do it. Isaac was a means to the end. God didn't want Isaac killed, he wanted to see Abraham's devotion. Abraham, would you move from your country to the land that I'll show you? "Yes Lord." "Abraham, would you do this?" "Yes, Lord." "Abraham, how bout this?" "Yes, Lord." Abraham was willing to do anything and everything that God asked him to do, so God asked the unthinkable. God thought to himself, what is the most prized possession of Abraham? What is the one thing that he would refuse me? And Isaac was the test. It sounds cruel, it sounds inhumane, but Isaac was safe the entire time.

If Abraham refused to give over Isaac, then Isaac would have been an idol. Now, when we think of idols, the usual image that comes to our minds is a crafted piece of wood or stone that represents a god or some spirit. A piece of earthly material that is supposed to have magical or sacred qualities. Religions all over the world have incorporated images and idols as a part of their belief system. As a matter of fact, the Judeo-Christian traditions are the only known religions in the world that do not use idols as a part of their daily practice. We just don't do it. As a matter of fact., what's that one Commandment? "Thou shall not make any idols or engraven images." God good, Idols bad. When we say the word "Idolatry", we visualize some object with people bowing down to it, chanting some tribal chant, with occasional sacrifices to appease the idol. But in actuality, a truer definition of an idol is something that takes the place of God. An idol is something that takes the place of God. In a perfect world, God would be the number one thing in our lives. Nothing would take the place or be elevated above, the Almighty. The giver of life would receive our gratitude, our service, our attention, and our praise. Everything we would do would somehow be related to, in an intentional manner, an act of reverence for God. If

we are happy to give almost everything we have to God, those things which we refuse to give are idols. We worship them more than God. We tend to think of idols as something bad. But for most of us, our idols are good things. Our virtues and values can become idols if we elevate them higher than we should. Every year at seminary, there is an open house in the spring, where people who feel called to the ministry can check out what seminary means. And there are those who feel strongly called, but in the end, don't want to give up their current job and the high paying salary it brings. High salary. Good! As an excuse not to go where you feel called by God, bad. Idol. I value people's personal privacy. Good characteristic. Not wanting to tell them about Jesus because I don't want to offend them or break that personal privacy, bad. Idol. Sending our kids to a private school because we want them to have a good education, good. Sending them to a private school because it's easier to do that than help fix the public school, bad. Idol. Wanting your child to play sports and learn and grow and be a team player? Good. Doing that on Sunday morning and missing worship? Bad. Idol. If you do that, find a Saturday night service to go to the night before. Several years ago, the YMCA's national convention had a proposal on the floor to take the C out of YMCA. The C stands for Christian. They wanted to take it out because they kept getting flack for having activities on Sunday morning. It didn't pass, not because of the Christian values, but because of tradition, marketing and name recognition. Idol. Idols are what we refuse to hand over to God. Although they just call it the Y, now.

Abraham was tested to see if he had any idols. God wasn't trying to be cruel. He didn't want Isaac hurt in anyway. Besides, he couldn't! God had promised Abraham many descendants, and Isaac was that only hope. But God took the most prized possession of Abraham to see if Isaac mattered more to Abraham than God. If so, idol. Is there anything that we hold back from God? Is there any portion of our life that we refuse to let God see because we'd be ashamed? Is there anything that we value more than our service to God? It sounds like a scary story, the sacrifice of a son. And then I remember that is what God did for us. God loved us so much that he gave his one and only son to die, so that we might live. In a sense, God fought fire with fire. Jesus took the sins of the world upon himself and endured a cruel death so that we would not have to suffer the fire ourselves. The only way for us to avoid death was for Jesus to die. If God would have refused Jesus, then Jesus would have been an idol. What are the Idols in your life? What are the things that we hold back? Lord, ask me for anything, but don't ask me for my marriage. Lord, ask me for anything, but let me have my Saturday night - don't I already give you Sunday morning? Lord, ask me for anything, but don't take away my anger. Don't take away my prejudices, don't take away my alcohol, don't take away my patriotism. Abraham was so blessed because of his obedience. God asked him to do the unthinkable. God still asks us for our devotion, praise and obedience. Are we listening? May we be so blessed.