

Sermon
St. Mary Nanoose Bay
July 2, 2017
Genesis 22:1-14 & Matthew 10:40-42

Thirty-two years ago, I gave birth to our first son. As someone who wasn't raised a Christian and didn't know the bible, I loved the story my husband Jim told me of God telling Sarah in her old age, that she would conceive a son. And how Sarah laughed at God but God *did* make her pregnant. I wasn't sure I could ever have children so the story spoke to me. And we called our firstborn, Isaac.

But what I didn't know at the time was this story about Isaac we heard today! Yikes!

How many of you find this story troubling?

How can we make sense of a story where God asks someone to sacrifice his son?

Some scholars say that this is the story of the moment in history when people made the switch from human sacrifice to animal sacrifice. I hadn't heard this one before.

Then there's a more modern take. For example, Wilfred Owen's famous poem on the deceptive glory of war:

When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
Neither do anything to him. Behold,
A ram, caught in the thicket by its horns;
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.

But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

A disturbing image.

Many people think this is the story of testing. God testing our faith and obedience. Or turning that on its head, perhaps it's insight into what it's like for God when we put God to the test over and over again. Either way, I don't like this one.

And there are countless other interpretations.

So if you're waiting for me to tell you the correct way of understanding this passage, I can't help you. As with all scripture, there are many ways to interpret, and where we stand in history, our culture, our own lives will affect what we hear and understand.

But there is a theme I want to explore. The one that challenges me and causes me most discomfort. Where I have much to learn about myself and others.

I think of sacrifice. Both conscious and unconscious. I can consciously give up something for another. It can be as simple as choosing to let go of my preferences; taking the focus off myself and what I want. To offer up to God my ideas of how things should be. I've used the example during Lent of letting go of our preference for the hymns we like or our preference for the liturgy to be a specific way trusting that God may be speaking to our neighbour through a particular song we dislike, or maybe even God may be wanting to speak to us but we are closed off by our preference.

Or sacrifice can be unconscious. The act of almost losing something precious because I've been self-centred and unaware. If I have any regrets about my parenting, they mostly have to do with

making choices to attend to work demands over meeting the needs of my sons when they were younger. Or saying and doing things to make myself look good at their expense. I remember laughing with a friend over the fluffy black slippers (so *not* me!) one son gave me for Christmas and then turning to see him standing there. Ouch! We all have made choices that have hurt others or ourselves because we were willing, consciously or unconsciously, to sacrifice something very precious to us that we took for granted.

Abraham was about to sacrifice the son he had waited for all his life. Why? Are we ever called to make terrible choices like he was? I think of William Styron's book, "*Sophie's Choice*," and the movie of the same name where a Jewish woman entering a concentration camp is forced to choose which one of her two children will live, and which will be sent to death. Do we believe in a God who would put us to the test like that? God didn't create that choice, the SS in charge of the camp did. Humans do those kind of things to other humans. God doesn't.

I read somewhere that the tests God gives us build character and faith, and the tests that come from Satan weaken and destroy us, and others.

So maybe it's not the test that we're meant to focus on in this story. Maybe it's God's grace – or as Abraham said, "The Lord will provide." Maybe we're being asked to trust. That the bottom line is that we can't know the mind of God. And that some things, in the moment, are very confusing. And when we tell the story about an event, we are telling our side of it. What was God's side of the story? We will never know.

Sacrifice involves *letting go*. And letting go means trusting. Trusting that we're not in control. God is.

There's nothing like parenting to teach a person this. From the time the child is born, the letting go starts. I remember the first time we let Isaac walk alone down the path in the housing complex where we lived. At first, he kept looking back. We encouraged him. "Just to the end of the trail where we can see you," we said. He found more courage and then suddenly, he was engaged in his own experience and stopped looking back at us. That was a big moment for me as I saw in an instance what the future held. For me, the penultimate letting go, especially of my first born, Isaac, when he left home was almost more difficult to bear than the deaths of my own beloved parents. The day Isaac took the bus and moved to Calgary, I was mown down by grief.

I had to trust. I had to. I could no longer protect my beloved son. And the miracle was that after a few months of very poor contact, he called to talk. And I remember the moment he said, "You know, it's amazing. Whenever I get stuck, there always seems to be someone there to help me!" Sweeter words could not have been heard. Thank you God!

Years later when our younger son Theo left home, I expected the same devastation. Jim and I vied to be the last to arrive home to the much quieter and less lively house. Each of us found excuses to be late. It was funny when we realized what we were doing and then we somehow eased into enjoying a new found freedom and the space and intimacy that opened us for us. We had learned once to let go and

trust our son to God. And while it was still hard, it was easier the second time round.

Today's story is one of letting go and of God providing something new for us. Abraham was asked to sacrifice his beloved son in the most crushing way imaginable. And somehow in the end, at the critical moment, God didn't require Abraham to destroy his own precious son.

And from our vantage point in history, perhaps our hearts can go out to God who did sacrifice his only Son. And out of that terrible event, we gained new life. What a mystery. What a gift.

God will provide. We have to trust. And give up our ideas of how life will proceed. We are not in control as much as we like to imagine or desire. But we do have our part to play. We can listen for the voice of God. We can make wise choices. We can learn from our mistakes. We can learn to trust and let go.

We have scripture to guide us. We have Jesus to remind us that God loves us. Each one of us. Each hair on our head. We will have hard times. We will be asked to sacrifice for others. We will be tempted to sacrifice what we love for the rewards of this world. And we will be asked and challenged *to let go*. Our whole lives are a series of letting go's. Yet Jesus reassures us that those who lose their life, will find it. And it's into this mystery that we let go. Ultimately whether we want to, or not.

So, this morning let us approach the table of mystery, this table of love, with open, wondering and trusting hearts. Amen.