

# *Saving Children*

Fourth in the Family of God Sermon Series

from the pulpit of  
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church  
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania  
by  
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Hebrews 11:17-20

<sup>17</sup>By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, <sup>18</sup>of whom he had been told, “It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you.” <sup>19</sup>He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. <sup>20</sup>By faith Isaac invoked blessings for the future on Jacob and Esau.

Genesis 22:1-18

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” <sup>2</sup>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 on one of the mountains that I shall show you.”<sup>3</sup> So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him.<sup>4</sup> On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away.<sup>5</sup> 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.”<sup>6</sup> Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together.<sup>7</sup> Isaac said to his father Abraham, “Father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?”<sup>8</sup> Abraham said, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So the two of them walked on together.<sup>9</sup> When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.<sup>10</sup> Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.

<sup>11</sup>But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.”<sup>12</sup> He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.”<sup>13</sup> And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.<sup>14</sup> 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.”

<sup>15</sup>The angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven,<sup>16</sup> and said, “By myself I have sworn, says the LORD: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son,<sup>17</sup> I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies,<sup>18</sup> and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.”

Everybody has trouble with this story. The great Danish theologian, Kierkegaard, made up several fanciful endings to it. Abraham started to kill himself instead of Isaac, imagined Kierkegaard, or Abraham pretended that his actions were the result of temporary insanity. <sup>1</sup>

Martin Luther's wife, Katherine, objected to it. "Martin," she said to her husband, the great Reformer, "I don't believe God would ask anyone to sacrifice his only son." There is a Jewish midrash that says that at the climax of the story, when Abraham raises the knife and is about to take his son's life, tears drip from his eyes into Isaac's eyes, and Isaac's vision is impaired for the rest of his life. We know from the Jacob stealing his birthright from Esau story that when Isaac is old, he has difficulty seeing. That imagined interpretation is meant to say that the impact of the near-sacrifice of Isaac is so devastating, that the way Isaac sees the world is forever changed at that moment when he fears for his life at the hand of his father. <sup>2</sup>

A contemporary Jewish poet wrote a poem about this text that ended, "I liked it better thinking Father Abraham had said, 'Forget it, Isaac, let's go home.'" <sup>3</sup>

Calling this story the most theologically demanding in all of scripture, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says rather succinctly: "This narrative is among the most odd and most compelling in the Bible." <sup>4</sup>

Its oddness and its power come from both the vivid detail and its strategic location in the larger story. Over these last weeks, on our journey with Abraham and Sarah up to this point we have seen that all the promises God made to them have hinged on their having Isaac. How else could they become the parents of a great nation and be an instrument of blessing to all the

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Achtemeier, "Together," Cox Best Sermons, vol. 2, p. 371-372.

<sup>2</sup> Bill Moyers, Genesis, p 223.

<sup>3</sup> Moyers, p. 226.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann, et al., Texts for Preaching, Year A, p. 381.

families of the earth? Isaac was not only their hope for the future; Isaac was the beginning of the fulfillment of the promises God had made.

The narrative has made us wait and wait until we have any hint that God is going to be true to his word. So after Abraham and Sarah finally produce an heir in their advanced age, suddenly in the next chapter God is uttering this startling command: "Take your son... whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on the mountain I will show you." Why on earth would God demand such a thing? This is not where the story ends, of course. In the end God provides the ram for sacrifice, God rescues the child, and Abraham has passed the test of faith. In the meantime, though, we do have this odd and compelling text in which, not only does God call on Abraham to do the unthinkable, to offer his son on the altar of sacrifice but God also places in jeopardy the long-delayed, but now realized, promise God himself has made – that an entire nation would be populated through Abraham and then Isaac.

Most biblical scholars agree that this story has two primary functions. First, it takes up the timeless, theological theme of faith being put to the test. Theologian and Old Testament scholar, Ellen Davis of Duke Divinity School, recounts a conversation with a dear friend, a devout Roman Catholic, just hours after his first child had died at birth. He said, "I could say, 'Why me?' ... but why not me? I knew this happens to people, and it never made me doubt God before. So why should I doubt God now when it has happened to me? But still," he said in agonizing pain, "I do not understand."

Davis reflected upon that conversation in light of this story: "This chapter of Genesis is the place you go when you do not understand at all what God allows us to suffer – and the last thing you want is a reasonable explanation, because any reasonable explanation would be a mockery of your anguish.... This story is the place you go when you are beyond anything you thought could happen... when the most sensible thing to do might be to deny that God exists at all, or cares at all, or has any power at all. But you are so deep into relationship with God that to deny all of that would be to deny your own heart and soul and mind... your own existence. And so," Davis

concludes, “you are stuck with your pain and your incomprehension, and the only way to move at all is to move toward God, to move more deeply into this relationship we call faith.”<sup>5</sup>

That’s the first of the two primary functions of this story. It asks the hard theological question: When tested, does Abraham have the kind of faith that trusts God, and will he live his life based on that trust? The second primary function of this story is to announce with boldness amid a world, in which religious ritual included human sacrifice, The Holy One of Israel, said, “No more.”

Thomas Cahill, author of *The Gifts of the Jews*, reminds us how old this story is, and how we cannot measure Abraham’s behavior by the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights, but only by the Code of Hammurabi and the practices of the Sumerian people who ordered their society with strict laws of retribution. Because human sacrifice was not uncommon then, Cahill suggests the story is “a symbolic renunciation, the dramatization of some unrecoverable moment in pre-history when the proto-Jews gave up the practice of human sacrifice while their neighbors continued to engage in it.”<sup>6</sup>

It thereby stands in our Judeo-Christian tradition proclaiming: ours is a God who gives, protects and secures the life of children. Based on these two primary functions – the call to trust when faith is put to the test, and the affirmation that God is intent on protecting and saving children, people who believe in the God of ancient Israel have some marching orders today. If we trust in God to fulfill the ancient promise to bless the families of the earth, then we need to be more intentional about saving children.

In our country, one of the wealthiest in the world, an estimated fifteen million children live below the poverty threshold. That is twenty-one percent of all American children – one in five – lives in poverty. One in seven lives with hunger. Every day in the United States, twenty-one children and teens

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<sup>5</sup> Ellen F. Davis, Duke Chapel, June 26, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Cahill, *The Gift of the Jews*, p. 83.

between the ages of one and seventeen, are shot, and four of them die. That's every day – four children are killed by guns... Worldwide, at least ten million children are in slavery, trafficking or forced labor, and three hundred thousand children serve as soldiers, some of them younger than ten years old.<sup>7</sup>

What can we do in response to God who promises *to bless all the families of the earth*, and who invites us to embark on a faith journey where children are cared for, protected and saved? First of all, know that your pledges and gifts to the church's annual stewardship enables this congregation to serve many organizations that seek a more abundant life for children. Here's just one example: While there are many agencies in greater Philadelphia that shelter homeless men, or women and children, Jane Addams Place provides for homeless families to stay together. A recent grant of our church's Outreach Council supports the Healthy Eating Initiative at Jane Addams Place which not only provides homeless families with healthy foods, but also gives parents choices to introduce fresh food options to their own children. Children are fed well, and their homeless parents have the dignity of choice in providing for their care.

Secondly, our Peacemaking Committee has worked to raise awareness among our community on issues of gun violence for years. In the coming year, we will be hosting the Reverend Deanna Hollas, the first ordained minister of any denomination in the nation whose entire focus is gun violence prevention through the Presbyterian Church (USA). Your gifts of the Peace and Global Witness Offering will further support her important work among our denomination for gun violence prevention.

Finally, there are countless hands-on ways through our church's ministries with children and youth, through tutoring, feeding, and providing care, through local and national advocacy efforts, all efforts through which we can be engaged in saving children. By our own involvements we can live trusting in the God of Abraham and Isaac, whose intention from the beginning

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<sup>7</sup> [pewresearch.org](http://pewresearch.org), [bradyunited.org](http://bradyunited.org); [nccp.org](http://nccp.org).

is to bless all the families of the earth, by caring for, protecting and saving children. Part of what Abraham and Isaac may have learned that day on Mount Moriah is that we are not fully alive until we find something which calls us to give our life away.

Episcopal priest, John Claypool preached a remarkable sermon based on this story just a couple of weeks after his ten-year-old daughter died of leukemia. “Years ago, when I first started taking the Bible seriously, this whole episode used to bother me a great deal,” he said. What kind of jealous God is it, I wondered, who demands even one’s child as a sign of devotion? As I moved more deeply into the biblical revelation, however, I came to realize that the point at issue was not that at all. What God was trying to teach Abraham here and throughout his whole existence was the basic understanding that life is gift – pure, simple, sheer gift – and that we, here on earth, are to relate to it accordingly.

Abraham had done nothing to earn the right of having a land of his own or descendants more numerous than the stars. Such a promise came as pure gift from God. Abraham was called on to receive it, to participate in it fully, sacrificially and joyfully, to handle it with the open hands of gratitude.” And then Claypool, with the death of his own child a recent open wound, repeats the message of grace in this terrible, beautiful story: “The whole point in the Abraham saga lies in God’s effort to restore humankind to the right vision of life. Only when life is seen as a gift and received with the open hands of gratitude is it the joy God meant for it to be. These were the truths God was seeking to emphasize as he waited so long to send Isaac and then asked for him back.”<sup>8</sup>

Friends, life is a gift. Throughout life – our faith is tested, and we are ever challenged to join God in caring for the lives of others, particularly the most vulnerable – children at risk. Because God intends the gift of life to be enjoyed by all the families of the earth.

AMEN.

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<sup>8</sup> John Claypool, “Life is Gift,” Tracks of a Fellow Struggler: How to Handle Grief, p. 65 ff.

