

**“God of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Chance: Abraham”**

**A Sermon for University Congregational Church**

**Sunday, May 12, 2019**

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Traditional Word

The angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven a second time<sup>16</sup> and said, “I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, <sup>17</sup>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, <sup>18</sup>and through your offspring<sup>[b]</sup>all nations on earth will be blessed, <sup>[c]</sup>because you have obeyed me.” Genesis 22:15-18

Contemporary Word

“The thing about roads is sometimes you happen upon them again. Sometimes you get another chance to travel down the same path.” — Jill Santopolo

“God of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Chance: Abraham”

One of the best things about engaging in theology is the great discussions that one gets to be a part of...in my own life I often get to spend time discussing morality, the idea that there are universal laws or ways of behaving, and then whether moral systems can exist outside of a religious tradition. I have run into this issue many times with my more Orthodox friends who believe that morality can only exist within the strictures of Christianity. I always point out to them that there were moral people prior to the

Christ Event, but that usually falls on deaf ears. It is almost impossible to change minds that have been cemented in an emotional manner by appealing to any rational argument. In other words, we will never convince someone that it is possible to be both moral and an atheist using rational explanations when they have arrived at their conclusion that morality requires Christianity using their emotions as their guide.

One of the great problems of a moral system based solely on your belief in God is this: What if your God asks you to perform an immoral act? What if your deeply held religious belief, is in fact, immoral. That’s quite a statement isn’t it—but this is a

pernicious idea in our world right now: That if one holds a specific religious belief deeply enough then that deep belief of yours trumps other people's views and beliefs that may run counter to your own. This is a great problem in a pluralistic society, because our deeply held religious beliefs are sometimes going to be in tension with others' beliefs.

And where does this end? In both Exodus and Leviticus we are very clearly instructed to not charge anyone interest on their loans. Now, there's a deeply held religious belief I could get behind! No more interest on my mortgage or credit cards? Sign me up! And don't forget what we are commanded to do to disobedient children: Deuteronomy says, in black and white and no uncertain terms "If a man [has] a stubborn and rebellious son, which will not obey the voice of his father, or the voice of his mother ... all the men of the city shall stone him with stones, that he die." I had thought about using that for today's Children's Sermon, but thought better of it. I've chosen extreme examples, but you see the problem with applying Biblical morality, written for a specific people in a specific context, to our modern context.

One of the great moral conundrums I have run up against is found in the book of Genesis—mind you, there are many moral conundrums in Genesis, but this one is particularly troubling. What are we to do with the story of Abraham, who so devotedly trusts his God, that when that God demands that he kill his son, Isaac, he willingly obeys and prepares to do so. And then, right before Abraham is to strike the killing blow, God intervenes and "changes God's mind" and spares Isaac. This is a troubling story in so many ways, not only that its untenable because God is asking Abraham to break one of God's own commandments—Thou Shalt Not Kill.

Hear, then, the words of this ancient story from Genesis 22: 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[a] 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."

In his book *The Binding of Isaac, Religious Murders & Kabbalah*, author Lippman Bodoff argues that Abraham never intended to actually sacrifice his son, and that he had faith that God had no intention that he do so. Rabbi Ari Kahn elaborates this view like this: Isaac's death was never a possibility — not as far as Abraham was concerned, and not as far as God was concerned. God's commandment to Abraham was very specific, and Abraham understood it very precisely: Isaac was to be "raised up as an offering", and God would use the opportunity to teach humankind, once and for all, that human sacrifice, child sacrifice, is not acceptable. This is precisely how the sages of the Talmud understood this story. Though readers of this story throughout the generations have been disturbed, even horrified, by this threat of infanticide, there was no miscommunication between God and Abraham. The thought of actually killing Isaac never crossed their minds.

The Jewish Publication Society, whom I trust implicitly in all things related to the Hebrew Bible, suggests Abraham's apparent complicity with the sacrifice was actually his way of testing God. Abraham had previously argued with God to save lives in Sodom and Gomorrah and by silently complying with God's instructions to kill Isaac, Abraham was putting pressure on God to act in a moral way to preserve life. More convincing evidence that Abraham thought that he would not actually sacrifice Isaac comes from Genesis 22:5, where Abraham said to his servants, "You stay here with the donkey... The boy and I will go up there; we will worship and we will return to you." By saying we (as opposed to I), he meant that both he and Isaac would return. It does seem to me that Abraham did not believe that Isaac would be sacrificed in the end. That's the problem with literal readings of metaphorical stories—they often don't mean what we think they mean.

What about those second chances that we are given but do not take? Abraham's story actually contains a number of 2nd chances. Genesis 12 starts with a powerful promise to Abraham—he will be blessed for generations and be the father of a mighty nation, if he but trusts in God. . And Abraham does, to a point. Later, God instructed Abraham to go on what appeared to be a dangerous journey. And Abraham did as God had instructed until trouble came—a great famine struck the

land and so Abraham said, enough of this, I'm going to Egypt—Abraham trusted God, but not quite enough. Later in Genesis 12, Abraham didn't trust that God would protect him and Sarah and he lied to the Egyptians about his relationship to Sarah, claiming that she was his sister. Even though Abraham messed up, God intervened and protected them. Instead of abandoning them, God gave Abraham a second chance. It seems that God is faithful to us, even when we are not necessarily faithful to God, because God is a God of 2nd chances. God's faithfulness is not dependent upon our belief, faith or obedience.

So, the story of Abraham is a difficult one—asked of God to sacrifice his son? Metaphor? Test? Epic story? I'm curious, though—and working on this sermon got me to thinking about some things.... How many times do we, as individuals, as families, as a community—how many times do we offer up our children on the altars of guns, purity, religion, tradition? How many more children must perish on the altar of the guns? How many more of Wichita's children are to be sacrificed to the God of methamphetamine? How many more of our young people are we willing to sacrifice to suicide—because they have been led to believe that they are somehow unworthy of being here—because they are pregnant—or gay—or questioning the religion of their family? How many times do we forsake their future (and ours) over some deeply held belief of how we think things should be? Shouldn't our love for our children make all of those other things moot?

Through my years with this congregation I have heard many of your stories—stories of how you arrived at this place—at University Congregational Church. Some of you have been here since the very beginning, in 1983, when this church was formed as the branching off of another congregational church here in Wichita. Some of you have found your way here through word of mouth or by hearing one of our ministers speak elsewhere in town. Some of you arrived here because you felt like you had nowhere else to go. You couldn't take the rigid dogma of the church community you were in, or you were finding questions within yourself that you couldn't find satisfactory answers to. I'm not saying that we solved all of that for every one of you, but what I hope we have offered to you is a safe place to ask questions, to have doubts and to be in a community that values you regardless of any belief you may or may not have. You have a 2nd chance here. I wonder if the story of Abraham is to remind us that perhaps we need to give God a second chance now and then. If we have these impossible expectations for God and God lets us down, it's easy to lose faith. Maybe Abraham's story is to remind us to give God a break. So, in your own faith journeys, where have you given God a second chance? When you traveled up the mountain, not certain of what was on the other side, did you completely trust that everything would work out—or were you stuck on the path, hesitant and full of anxiety—afraid to move. Afraid to continue your journey out of fear of what would happen. I imagine the Isaac was pretty anxious on that three-day journey—he strikes

me as a pretty smart guy—three days on the road, heading to a place of sacrifice—and they don't have a lamb with them. Isaac had to have known something was up.

International, best-selling author Jill Santopolo has a lovely quote that I turn to every once in a while (it's in your bulletins)—she writes this: “The thing about roads is sometimes you happen upon them again. Sometimes you get another chance to travel down the same path.” We are all traveling down this road of life—and some of us know different paths—some of us might know a shortcut—some of us venture off the path and go and wander over there for a while. I've done my fair share of wandering. But in the end, we are all co-travelers on this journey. Abraham thought his journey was going to be one thing, but it ended up being another—and he did ultimately keep his covenant with God and God did indeed bless him.

The story of Abraham reminds us that sometimes life is messy, we're going to make mistakes, and the path is rocky, but if we have faith we will ultimately be blessed. And if we are lucky enough to find some co-travelers on our faith journey—you know, the ones who stay behind with the donkey—the ones to whom we said “hey, we're going up to the mountain and I know it looks bleak right now—but have faith—we will return” well, if you can find co-travelers like that—like this group here--then nothing can be much better than that, can it? Especially if our deeply held beliefs and moral systems are compatible.

I'm grateful for this community of faith-journeyers and donkey watchers, people who aren't afraid to head up the mountain, not certain in what we'll find, not always knowing what God might ask of us, but trusting that it will all work out in the end. It may not end how we expected or even wanted, but I have faith that it will work out—sometimes that all we can ask for. AMEN

Please stand as you are able and sing our closing benediction.

## RESOURCES

The Hebrew Bible, NRSV

The Hebrew Bible, Robert Alter, translation

<https://jillsantopolo.com/bio/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2010/mar/29/kierkegaard-philosophy-abraham-isaac>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Binding\\_of\\_Isaac](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Binding_of_Isaac)

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47393/anthem-for-doomed-youth>