October 25th, 2020

Springfield Presbyterian Church

I’m Not Even Sure Anymore What Season We Are In.

The 229th Day of March

From Submission to Provision

I. Embracing the Reading

This is probably one of the best-known texts from the Abrahamic period, perhaps because it is so controversial...and to be honest, it should be controversial. Abraham was asked by God to do the very unthinkable – to take his beloved biological son, that he waited 100 years for and whom he loves so much – and then God asks him to offer him up as a sacrifice.

You can almost hear the melancholy response of Abraham, not a jubilant, “Here I am” but more of “Here...I am.” I’m here, I will be faithful, if this is what you ordain, O God, but this is not what I want, but your will alone. Abraham has had his ups and downs of faith, both being incredibly faithful but also struggling with human sin. I wonder about the inner-dialogue in Abraham’s head though – is he so willing, and bearing in mind that he is certain his son will die, he is willing to do this?

I’m not sure about you, but I think I would have more of a scrappy argument with God in this moment. This is my son, the son I love, the son you gave us, the son who I waited all this time for, the son who bears the covenant, this is my beloved child and you are asking me to do the very unthinkable. I don’t know many of us who wouldn’t say a direct, ‘No’ to God in this moment and it makes me wonder, why does the test of faithfulness have to be so extreme?

II. Binding Isaac

And can you imagine hearing that sweet young man’s voice, looking up to his dad whom he trusts and loves and he asks, “Dad, we have the fire and wood, but where’s the offering?” And then what was Isaac thinking as his dad started to bind him and lay him on the wood, especially in that dramatic moment when his dad pulls out the knife. “Dad, what are you doing?” The look of panic, shock, and absolute fear was probably written all over Isaac’s face. As Abraham peers into his eyes and as Isaac looks right back at him, I can’t imagine the level of betrayal, the feeling of complete fear from both parties that would fill the air on that mountaintop.

III. Is it a test?

And these men do not know it is a test – we know, as readers, and certainly God knew that Isaac would not be sacrificed but these men on the mountain are facing life and death with no future in view. And, to be fair here, if they did know it was a test...it would be no test at all. The test needed to be more than words, it needed to be something so extreme and difficult, unthinkable and unfathomable that would point to Abraham’s faithful following even in the most challenging of circumstances.

Yet what this testing is has to be parsed out. This isn’t a test to show Abraham a moral lesson, or even necessarily that Abraham trusts God more – this test is a matter that confirms the fact that Abraham trusts God in having his best interests at heart and so he will go where God commands.

IV. Vulnerability of God

Now, I also wonder if God knew that Abraham would follow through. We assume, because God is all knowing and all-powerful, but we’ve seen in other parts of our Genesis exploration that there is free-will. Does God know completely that Abraham will follow devoutly? What is God’s stake in the sacrifice here? If God knew that Abraham would absolutely and undeniably sacrifice his son and that he is that faithful, then God would never have to use this test, so there is some sense that God is watching to see Abraham follow-through.

Yet when Abraham does follow through, God provides in abundance – he promises him the moon and the stars – or all the stars in the sky and the grains of sand at the seashore. His offspring will be never-ending, and we as children of Abraham, are an active sign of that continual covenant transcending through every generation, no matter the circumstance or context we’ve found ourselves in societally.

V. So...

So...where do we go from here? What does this old, but well-known story of tangible faithfulness and sacrifice show us? Where is the good news?

The good news is that in our submission, there is the promise of provision on the other side of the sacrifice. Yet the sacrifice we see in our own lives does not have to be as extreme as the scene between Abraham and Isaac. We make small submissions, small sacrifices all the time, in faithfulness, and in God’s command to love one another. When you get that heavy nudge by the Holy Spirit, when you feel called to do something that you really don’t know why it needs done, but you just do it anyway – there are the moments of God’s command being fulfilled through you.

Again, it doesn’t have to be big. Here’s a simple story and it’s not to highlight my holiness, just my participation in trying my best as a human to be faithful. One of my friend’s daughter’s was heading off to college in this time of pandemic and one of the ways in which she best expresses herself is through art. It was her last day in Maryland and I had these expensive acrylic pens which I loved and it’s like they kept staring back at me. You need to go give these to Alex.

And so I stepped out of my own way, put the pens in a rubber band and dropped them off with Alex before she headed to school. I was honest as I handed them off, I said, “I sound like I’m crazy, but Jesus told me you needed these pens. I’m not sure why, but I feel very strongly about it. Please take them, use them, and create art.” Alex admittedly did look at me like I was a little nuts, but she also happily took the pens and then sent me a photo a week later of some amazing art that she had created.

Now, this seems so minute in comparison to sacrificing your only son and it is – but the point here is that God commanded me to do something and I did it. I did not have to understand it, I did not need to want to, I just needed to follow the command. It was that simple and that hard. And God provided the blessing of that photo and the knowledge that I listened with my heart.

The point here is as hard and as easy as you wish it to be – when you follow God, even in the smallest of things and in the most scary sacrifices too – God provides. We don’t need to like it, we don’t need to understand it, it isn’t blind following, it’s just knowing that God knows more than we do about what comes next.

This week, think about the moments God has called you or commanded you to do something and whether you followed through or not. Is there something right now that God is calling you to do? Listen closely, for the Holy Spirit is calling – may we all be brave enough, wise enough, and daring enough to follow the command that God sets before us and trust the blessing on the other side. Amen.