

**2/22/26****The Mountain of Obedience****Genesis 22:11-18****Pastor Nathanael Ryan, Brewster Baptist Church**

Good morning. What's the greatest thing you've ever been asked to give up? What's the greatest thing *God* has ever asked you to give up? When a rich, young ruler comes to Jesus and asks him what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus says, "Keep the commandments." "Which ones?" the young man asks, and Jesus lists some of the Ten Commandments. "All of these I have kept since I was a boy," the man says, and Jesus says, "You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give it to the poor, and then you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." The Scriptures tell us that the man went away very sad because he had great wealth. (*Luke 18:18-23*)

There's this core principle in the teachings of Jesus that, in order to be faithful, in order to be obedient, in order to follow Jesus and live for him and be his disciple, it must come at the cost of something, giving something up. And the logic behind this makes sense. If what Jesus offers us is eternal life in the presence of God, with the promise that the worst things in life — like death, sorrow, crying or pain — will one day be done away with, why wouldn't we be willing to give up whatever Jesus asks of us? The reward is just so much greater than the cost. Perhaps, we look down on this rich, young ruler for holding on to his attachments, for failing to follow Jesus, for putting his money and his possessions first in his life and saying "no" to the gracious invitation of God. Perhaps, we figure that, if we were in a similar situation, we'd do better — that we would at least be able to answer the call.

But what if the one thing Jesus asked you to give up was the one thing you cherished the most? Would you still be faithful? Could you still answer the call? I want you to close your eyes for a moment, and imagine your house is burning and you're standing outside. The firefighters are doing absolutely everything they can do to put the fire out, but the smoke is thick, the windows are black, and it's clear that everything is going to be left to rubble. But then a policeman comes forward and says to you, "You can go back inside to save one thing." What do you do? What item would you choose?

If a loved one was trapped in the house, you know what you're doing, and it isn't even a question. You're saving that loved one. But if there wasn't, it probably wouldn't take you very long to come up with an answer to the question — what item do you

choose? It's going to be something of personal value to you, not an expensive item *per se*, but something of great emotional worth — something that could never be replaced.

Now, I want you to open your eyes and ask yourselves, “What would I do if God asked me to give that up, the one thing I would save in the fire? Could I do it? If God asked me to give up, and lose forever, the one thing I cherish the most in this world, could I possibly do it? Could I possibly follow through?”

It's easy to say we trust God when we're asked to give up something small. It's easy when the cost is manageable. But what happens when the cost becomes something we can't imagine we'd ever lose? Then, faith becomes something else, something else entirely. Do we trust God, his plan and purpose for our lives — when, where he wants us to go and what he wants us to do don't make sense — and even cause us to question the truth of his character: his goodness and love?

That's the “test” Abraham was given in the passage we read earlier. As we continue our “Mountains of God” series this morning, we're confronted with a passage that's both viscerally disturbing and unsettling to our categories. What Abraham is asked to do, as a *father*, is something that defies all human comprehension. It profoundly shakes us to our very core. It forces us to question our very assumptions of who God is: Is he loving? Is he just? Is he who he says he is? I'm not going to sugar-coat this story, or give you some sort of comforting explanation behind what God might have been thinking and why, because frankly, I think the text demands that I don't. What we've got here is an image of God commanding the murder of a child, and asking his father to do it. It's as disturbing as it sounds: “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 that I will show you” (*Genesis 22:2*).

This is a story meant to be *sat with*, not solved, so I want to resist our urge to try. It's supposed to make us uncomfortable. It's meant to disarm our defenses and lay us bare before the presence of God, where all our certainties fall away and only trust remains. What happens when obedience to God appears to contradict everything we think we know about him? How can we be obedient when what God has asked us to do seems inconsistent with his character? This is Abraham's dilemma, and it's the dilemma we're invited to confront, ourselves, as we wrestle with this story.

Abraham has been asked to sacrifice his own son, his greatest possession. He's been asked to give up the very thing that's most precious to him, in a single act of obedience. Can he do it? The psychological torment of that question must have been unbearable, especially when you consider who Isaac is in this story and what he represents. Any parent being asked to give up — or worse, murder — their own child is horrifying, but Isaac isn't just merely a *son*, he's the embodiment of all of God's faithfulness in Abraham's life up to that point — he's the son of the promise. If you remember from the story of Abraham and Sarah, they were barren for many years. They didn't have children, and thus, didn't have any heirs. They were well past child-bearing age, and they figured all hope was lost. But God spoke to Abraham and made a promise to him — he made a covenant. God said, "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you. I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing" (*Genesis 12:2*). And later God said: "A son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir. Look up at the sky and count the stars — if indeed you can count them . . . So shall your offspring be" (*Genesis 15:4-5*). Isaac was the long-awaited child who God promised to Abraham and Sarah, the child who was going to turn into a great nation. God made a covenant with Abraham that he would be faithful to him and bless his descendants forever, and Isaac was the sign of that promise. Abraham was 100 years old when Isaac was born, and Sarah was 90. They had waited decades for a son, and grieved that they would never have one — until God stepped in and made a promise. But now, God tells Abraham that he's taking this son away, as soon as the promise was fulfilled — or so it would seem. The God who once said, "Through Isaac your offspring shall be named" (*Hebrews 11:18*), now says, "Offer him" (*Genesis 22:2*). How could this be? What must God have been thinking? What was *Abraham* thinking? The text remains painfully silent.

The emotional torment we expect Abraham to have, in this moment, is nowhere to be found in the text — and I think this is the most disturbing detail of all. When God asks him to give up his most prized possession, the child whom he loves, the child of the promise, the child who represents both Abraham's future *and* God's faithfulness in his life, Abraham shows no emotion. He remains silent. All he does is get up, make the arrangements to sacrifice his child, and begin the journey. That's all we get. We're given no indication of Abraham's emotional state. All we get is sheer, unadulterated, obedience. "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. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance” (*Genesis 22:3-4*). We get no tears, no fear, no trembling, no anguish, no prayers, not even a single question. Just pure obedience. He did what God told him to do. I would give up a lot to know what Abraham might have been thinking in this story, but the text remains painfully silent. We have to imagine this is intentionally so.

We don’t get any emotion from Abraham when God asks him to sacrifice his beloved son on an altar, as much as we wish we did. At least that would make the story more *comfortable* for us. We don’t get that, but we do get one thing: we get an assurance from Abraham that, no matter what he might have been thinking, no matter what he might have been feeling in that moment, no matter what sort of inner torment or agony he was experiencing as he was walking up the mountain of obedience with his son, God still would provide in some way that Abraham didn’t yet know or comprehend. What we get, in this text, is Abraham operating with a faith that says, “I *know* God. I *know* that he’s true to his word. I *know* God. I *know* that his promises do not fail. None of this makes sense to me. It’s terrifying. It’s horrible. It’s overwhelming. But I trust the God I *know*, who’s shown up for me before. I trust God even more than my own understanding and even more than my own instincts – when I want to run.”

And you know why we can infer that Abraham was thinking this? Because, in the subtle details of the text, we’re given clues. We don’t get any emotion or insights into Abraham’s psyche, but we do get actions, *behaviors*. And these suggest that Abraham is far more grounded than initially meets the eye. Abraham is told to sacrifice his own son on the top of the mountain, but yet, when he approaches the mountain’s base, he’s assured that both he *and Isaac* will come down. “On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. 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” (*Genesis 22:4-5*, emphasis added). With whatever fear or distress he may have been experiencing, with whatever inconsolable grief that was constricting his heart, or with whatever confusion was plaguing his mind or clouding his thoughts, Abraham still speaks in the plural: “*WE* will worship; *WE* will come back to you.” Somehow, some way, God will make good on his promise. However this unfolds, God will not abandon

what he's said. A great nation *will* come from Isaac, even if Abraham doesn't understand how.

It's as if Abraham is saying here, "I don't know how this story ends. I don't know what God is going to do. I don't know how *obedience* and *promise* can possibly coexist on this mountain, but it's going to, because I trust the God I *know*, even if his actions don't make sense to me right now." And Abraham *doubles down* on this confidence. When he and Isaac are on their way up the mountain, Isaac turns to Abraham and realizes they aren't bringing an animal to sacrifice. He asks his father, "Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" (*Genesis 22:7*). And Abraham has the courage to look at his little boy in the eyes, the one he's just been commanded to *kill*, and say, "God Himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son" (*Genesis 22:8*). *God* will provide. Abraham has no idea what it's going to look like, but God will provide. He knows he will. And you know what? God does. He does provide. Let's read the conclusion of the story, and find out how:

Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. "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." 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. 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" (*Genesis 22:10-14*).

Abraham named that mountain "The LORD will provide", because he did. The Lord *did* provide. After commanding Abraham to give up the very thing he loved the most — the child of the promise, the child God gave to him and promised would one day become a great nation — God provided. He provided another way. Abraham proved his faith.

But I want you to notice something. This story doesn't end with Abraham walking away with some sort of relief, or emotional resolve. We can assume he did, but again, the text doesn't give us any indication. What we do get is a revelation, a revelation about who God is, that's important to know. This series is about mountaintop experiences, and mountains are places, in the Scriptures, where God repeatedly reveals himself in new

ways to his people. What Abraham receives is a revelation — clarity about the nature of who God is, his character.

Abraham first goes up the mountain with a question: “Can I trust God even when I don’t understand him?” He comes down with an answer: “The LORD will provide.” That’s what this story gives us — not an explanation. We never learn why God puts Abraham and Isaac through this ordeal, and we don’t get a neat resolution. One has to wonder what Isaac must have thought of his dad’s willingness to kill him, after the fact. We don’t get either of those things. What we get is a deeper understanding of who God is. That’s the point of this story. Because yes, while this story is about Abraham and his faith, it’s also about the kind of God Abraham puts his faith *in*. What kind of God would lead someone up a mountain like this? And more importantly, what kind of God meets them there? Because, when everything is on the line in this story — the knife is raised and the *promise* of a son and the *commandment* to sacrifice him seem to collide — what does God do? He speaks. He interrupts. He stops it. “Abraham! Abraham! . . . Do not lay a hand on the boy” (*Genesis 22:11-12*). God intervenes. This matters, because in the end, the story does not conclude with the death of the son, it ends with God providing.

In a world where gods demanded sacrifices, where one’s devotion was measured by how much you were willing to give up, the God of Abraham reveals to be something different. He shows himself to be a God who does not ultimately take, but provides. God provides the sacrifice in this story. He provides the way. He provides the ram. He provides life where only death was expected. And this changes everything. The point of this story is not, “How far are you willing to go for God?” The point is, “Do you trust the God who provides?”

And this brings us back to the question I asked at the beginning of the sermon: What is the one thing that you hold most tightly to, that you treasure the most? If God asked you for it, could you let it go? For some of us, this isn’t physical. It’s control. It’s security. It’s the future we’ve carefully planned for. It’s the life we’ve imagined for ourselves. It’s a dream. It’s an identity. It’s a thing that, if it were taken from us, we wouldn’t know who we’d be without it. The question this story asks us is not, “Would you destroy it?” It’s, “Can you trust God with it, even when you don’t know what he’ll do?”

Because that's what Abraham does. He exemplifies it. He places what he loves the most in the hands of God, and discovers God is faithful, God is good, God is loving. He's exactly who Abraham believed God was. Can *you* do the same with the things of this world *you* value the most? This is the heart of the passage. And I hope it makes you uncomfortable.

Let's pray:

Father God,

Show us how to trust who you've revealed yourself to be, though we don't know the future and you do. Help us to trust in the revealed truth of the Mountain of Obedience, that you are the God who provides, and are the good steward of the things of the world we hold most dearly: our families, our finances, our futures, our dreams, our hopes. May we embrace the discomfort this story creates in us. May it strip away all our certainties, so we can rely on trust: trust that you have our best good in mind, trust that your promises are faithful and true, and trust that, wherever we go and whatever we do, you're always by our side. Even when it hurts, may we praise you. Even when all seems lost, may we praise you. Even when it makes no sense to sing, may we praise you, and louder, again, may we sing your praise. Amen.

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion**

1. When you hear *Genesis 22:1-14* read, what is your honest emotional reaction to this story? What parts of the story do you think are the hardest to sit with?
2. What do you make of the fact that Abraham shows no emotion in the text — no questions, no hesitation, no protest? Why do you think the text is written this way? What do you think the author is intending?
3. God has promised that his covenant would come through Isaac — yet, he commands Abraham to sacrifice him. How do you understand this tension? What does it reveal about faith?
4. Have you ever experienced a situation where following God didn't make sense, or where you struggled to reconcile what you believed about God with what you were going through? How did you resolve this?
5. Abraham tells Isaac, as they're walking up the mountain, that "the Lord will provide the sacrifice," and, after God provides the ram, he names the mountain "The Lord will provide". What do you think that statement reveals about Abraham's trust in God? How have you experienced God's provision in your own life?
6. What do you think this story ultimately reveals about God's character? How does the fact that God provides the sacrifice shape the way we understand him?
7. Pastor Nate writes the following: "We cannot know God simply from our human intellect's conception of what we think the 'perfect' God might look like. We cannot make God in our own image. We can only know God through who he's revealed himself to be in the Scriptures, in creation, and in the history of his people." What do you think of this idea? Do you agree or disagree? Spend a few minutes making a list of the god you *want*, and then prayerfully reflect on how this god compares to the God who *is* revealed in the Scriptures.