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Genesis 22: 1-14

*Faithful God, your love stands firm from generation to generation, your mercy is always abundant. Give us open and understanding hearts, that having heard your word, we may seek Christ's presence in all whom we meet. Amen.*

### **“A Difficult Story”**

In the second chapter of Frederick Buechner's epic novel, *Son of Laughter*, Isaac tells his son Jacob a story. It's a story of Isaac's childhood.

A dark story.

By the end of the telling of the story the elderly Isaac has covered his face with ashes and thrown himself down by a pile of dung. He lays there motionless. As if he were dead.

He told his younger son Jacob about the time that he and his father went on a journey.

It was a journey that Isaac was not meant to return from.

Isaac tells how they climbed a high mountain. His father, Abraham, carried a live coal in his hand to make a fire for a burnt offering. But, Isaac wondered where the gift was. There was no gift.

Except, as far as his father knew, he was the gift.

Isaac had to carry his own bundle of sticks. And then when the pile of sticks was arranged, waiting for an offering, Isaac was tied up by his father and flung onto the pile of sticks. And before the ram was heard rustling in the thicket, Abraham had the knife high in the air to slay his son.

God had told him to do this. And, God provided a ram so that it didn't have to be fulfilled.

As Buechner tells the story, it scarred Isaac forever.

Wouldn't it scar you?

This story raises so many questions. Big questions. Questions about the kind of father who would hear this Voice in his head and follow it. Questions about Abraham's unflinching obedience to God. But most of all it raises questions about the kind of God that would ask this. This is one of the most terrifying texts in the Bible. It shows us a face of God that we would rather keep out of our consciousness.

I was trying to think of other Biblical stories that are as awful as this one. I couldn't think of many. The story of Job is pretty bad; there's a psalm about bashing babies' heads against rocks that is gruesome; one could argue that the crucifixion is cold, but it ends in a resurrection, so we deal OK with that one.

But in this story, there's no apparent reason for God testing Abraham; the narrator doesn't tell us if the test is for God's sake or Abraham's sake. And Abraham's intentions and thoughts are hidden. We don't know why he blindly followed God's command, only that 3 times he said, "Here I am," and did what God commanded him to do. What was going on inside Abraham during their 3 day journey to Mount Moriah? Did he ever stop to question God, did he ever turn around and tell Isaac, "You know what, son, I think we'll skip that sacrifice." What did he think when he saw the place where the sacrifice was to take place?

We don't know. All we know is what the narrator tells us, which is very little. If anything, the absence of details heightens the literary suspense.

As you can imagine, there are a multitude of responses to the story. Bob Dylan wrote about this story in his song "Highway 61 Revisited" that makes an interesting connection between fathers sacrificing their children and the countless young sons who were sent to fight and to die in Vietnam. Post Holocaust, some theologians question why God didn't save Jewish children from the gas chambers when God did save Isaac. A rabbinical midrash on the text does include Abraham questioning God. And many others have simply stated that Abraham's response to God should have been the same one Jesus gave to Peter: get behind me, Satan.

But this is the story we're left with; a starkly told, chilling story about a father who willingly climbs a mountain to kill his son. Why, we ask, would he do that? How could he do that? And what kind of God would ask for something so horrible?

Perhaps you'll feel better when I tell you that this story reflects the culture of the day, where child sacrifice was practiced by some Near Eastern cultures. However, it wasn't a practice the Israelites followed and, in fact, child sacrifice was strictly forbidden. There are two references in the book of Leviticus prohibiting the people from sacrificing a child to the god Molech, a Canaanite deity who was a god of the underworld. There are plenty of interpreters who say that God's test was a test to see if Abraham had given up the practice of human sacrifice. There are others who say the story was a passionate argument against this practice because it showed its original audience that God is not that kind of God. Either way, the point is that the story was originally told for the sole purpose of instructing people to do the exact opposite of what Abraham did.

Which is good news, yes? When I read that I was relieved. But . . .but, we're still left with this story in the Bible . . .it's a part of our sacred story . . .so as much as we might want to tear it out, or chalk it up to a sign of its times, I don't think we can. I think we need to look this story squarely in the face and ask, "What does it mean for us today? What is God's word trying to say to us today through this chilling story?"

Well, I think one thing this story teaches us is that God can and will ask us to do some very difficult things. This is not a message that always sits well with us and it's a difficult message for us to hear, because contemporary society likes to emphasize what God can do for us, but not what God demands from us. I think one of the reasons Genesis 22 is so shocking is because it places a demand on us, a big demand of a demanding God who wants our sole allegiance and demands that we let go of those things we hold most precious. It's the type of demand Jesus placed on his disciples when he tells them to deny themselves and take up the cross and follow him, to not look back, to not even take the time to attend your father's funeral.

This is not the God we like to follow, because by and large we like God to make us feel good about who we are and what we do. We like a God who provides for us without asking anything from us in return. We like a God we can serve without it costing us anything. But can God be served without costing us anything? The hard lesson of this story is no, God cannot.

This message doesn't sit well. What does sit well today is what one commentator calls "Christianity Lite", which is a brand of Christianity that takes all the pesky inconveniences and demands out of Christianity. You can participate in a few activities here and there, but there is no need to do anything uncomfortable, and certainly nothing life changing. And God would never make any demands of you, never ask you to make a commitment, let alone make a sacrifice. Christianity lite churches, as one writer said, may be full of people but they have very few disciples.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one of the most influential theologians of the 20th century, who happened to know a little something about sacrifice, once made a critical observation of Protestant churches in the US. The cushions on the pews of most Protestant churches became for Bonhoeffer a metaphor for a church that valued comfort more than commitment to the gospel.

Bonhoeffer also coined the phrase "Cheap grace"; it was one his favorite subjects. Bonhoeffer said the difference between God's grace and cheap grace is that the former is a gift from God, freely given, which stirs us to follow Christ. The latter, cheap grace, stirs nothing in us but a feel good feeling. Cheap grace is believing that I don't have to do anything-for anyone-because Jesus has done everything for me. Cheap grace is believing that God will never make any demands on me, never ask me to sacrifice, never ask me to do anything I'm not already doing.

This is not to say that Bonhoeffer believed our good works alone will save us; he didn't; he very much believed in God's grace that is freely given. But as recipients of God's grace, we should feel compelled to serve God's people, even –

and maybe even especially when – that requires making a sacrifice. In his Letters and Papers from Prison, Bonhoeffer wrote “The church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating but helping and serving” (Migliore 1991, 196).

Bonhoeffer defined the church as the community that exists for others, no matter the demands or sacrifices God places on us. The church is to meet human needs—food, shelter, clothing; and spiritual needs such as encouragement, hope, and love. When the church and its people begin to think that it only exists for the comfort and well-being of its own people, dare I suggest that it ceases to be a church. Meeting the needs of the physically hungry and the spiritually hungry is what God demands of us even if that means we have to sacrifice something.

A couple of years ago Terry and I spent a short weekend in New York City. During all my trips there I had never been to the Statute of Liberty, so we decided to go. It was awesome. We took the ferry over, and even though we couldn't go up in it, it was a beautiful sight to behold, standing there as a beacon of hope for all the people to see. Inscribed on one of its tablets, as I'm sure you know, is a poem by Emma Lazarus that concludes with these famous words:

"Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

After touring Liberty Park, we went to Ellis Island and heard the stories of the huddled masses, the tired, the poor, and the homeless who have come to our shores looking for a place to call home. We heard and read their stories, stories of the sacrifices they made during their pilgrimage here so they could have a better place to live and work and raise their families; so they could live in a country in which all people are created equal and that values life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; freedom.

On this Fourth of July weekend, as we attend parades and bar-b-ques and watch fireworks and celebrate our country's birthday, we need to remember that this freedom is not free; it comes with a cost; it comes because countless men and women have sacrificed their lives and are willing to put their lives on the line. Some of you have done that; and almost all of us have family members who have done that.

But as we celebrate our nation's founding, we also need to remember that love for this country of ours is not an exclusive, intolerant love but an expansive love, a love that Colin Powell was talking about when he remembered his parents arriving at Ellis Island in 1923 from Jamaica, “an America with a big, charitable, open heart that reaches out to people in need around the world.” God calls us to make sacrifices and God makes great demands of us, not because God is intolerant, but because God loves everyone and wants and everyone to live as with dignity and worth.

God places this demand on us, and occasionally tests us, to see if we can do it, still live up to that ideal. It is an awesome responsibility, but a responsibility we cannot shirk nor turn away from, no matter how difficult it may be.

Amen.