

Sermon: 1st Sunday in Lent

Text: Genesis 22:1-18 (vv. 7,8)

Theme: A test of faith.

Goal: To assure that what God has planned for us is good; even if we don't understand it. God didn't spare His Son.

Dear Friends,

Introduction: This is a very difficult story for us. How can the merciful God ask His friend Abraham for such a huge sacrifice? Can you put yourself in Abraham's shoes? *Luther said that he was unable to climb this mountain. He was down at the bottom with the servants and the rest of the asses, wondering what was going on. If Luther was perplexed by this, don't be surprised that you find yourself wondering what is happening here.* (Phil Brand). If you have children, maybe just one like Abraham, it disturbs you – it disturbs me a lot...

But for the ancients of Abraham's time it was not that nonsense as it is for us. Many primitive religions, even now in Africa, ask for human sacrifices. If you wanted something very special from your god, you had to offer him the most precious you had: not just an animal, but one of your children. I heard this in Mozambique last time I was there. The students shared with me some prohibited and illegal practices that still happen: If you want to become rich, or to surpass a big crisis in your life, you have to offer one of your children.

I – God's request

Maybe this helps to understand why Abraham didn't argue with God and obeyed Him immediately. But there is a huge difference between the practices of primitive religions and our story. In primitive religions people bargain with their false gods, offering them this or that to receive something. Here God is asking for a sacrifice,

without promising anything. And God asked for the most precious Abraham had: His only and beloved son Isaac. Therefore this event is called “a test of faith”. God said: “Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountain I will tell you about.”

A test of faith. *Is God asking us to be or to do something impossible?*

(Phil Brandt)... Yes. He is asking us to be perfect and to obey His Commandments! Is it not that serious for you? Are you aware that if you don't obey the Commandments one hundred per cent you are condemned? If you think seriously about it, it takes you to desperation. - But, wait, “the Lord will provide” ...

II – Abraham's obedience

“Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac... and set out for the place God had told him about.” Abraham didn't delay to obey God. He didn't postpone his decision. - When Abraham and Isaac were climbing the mountain, Isaac asked his father: “Where is the lamb for the burnt offering? Abraham answered: God will provide.” And when he reached the place, he did exactly what had to be done. Did he explain to Isaac what was happening? Did Isaac agree to be sacrificed? The story doesn't tell us these details.

The tradition is that this mountain on which Abraham did this was Moriah, which was also known later as Zion, the spot where the temple was built, the very hill on which Jesus would die, outside the walls, on an outcropping they called “The Skull.” (Phil Brandt). Perhaps that is why this story was chosen for the 1st Sunday in Lent, the beginning of Jesus' pilgrimage to be sacrificed on the Calvary.

Abraham's obedience by faith is highlighted several times in the New Testament as an example for us. And therefore he is also called “the

father of all believers”. Hebrews 11:17-19 is the most remarkable application of this event for our faith and obedience. It says: “By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.”

III – God intervention and promises

But God didn't allow Abraham to sacrifice his only and beloved son. He stopped Abraham's hand when he was about to kill his son at the last second! Abraham had passed the test. God provided a ram caught by its horn in a thicket and Abraham offered it to the Lord. The faith of Abraham and his obedience were not in vain. Therefore God renewed His threefold promise to Abraham: 1) Abraham's descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. 2) His descendants would conquer the land of their enemies, the Promised Land; 3) through Abraham's offspring all nations on earth would be blessed.

Abraham's offspring who brought blessing to all nations on earth is Jesus Christ. *Two thousand years after Abraham and Isaac climbed that hill with the wood for that sacrifice strapped to Isaac's back, another son of Abraham, Jesus Christ, walked up a hill, the same hill, with a wooden cross laid upon his back. This time no ram would be given in his place, for he was the very Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, the very sacrifice on our behalf which would free this world (each of us) of sin and death and brokenness. When his body was carried down and laid in a tomb, everyone thought that it was over, but in truth it had just begun. For that death was death's*

undoing, and that sacrifice was the beginning of the end for Satan's hold on this world. (Phil Brandt).

Conclusion: This story helps us to understand better Lent and the sacrifice of Christ, God's only and beloved Son, on our behalf. Instead of Isaac, a ram was offered. Instead of us, who deserve death and eternal condemnation, the Lamb of God was offered. The same God, who provided a substitute for Isaac, provided a substitute for us on the cross: his "only and beloved Son"; and He always provides everything for us. "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, with him, graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32).

God has not come and asked me for my son; He asks me for much less; and I have grumbled and complained when I have to come to the Service, to give some special offering, to do some extra efforts for His kingdom... Isn't it so? Think about it next time God asks you to do something for His Kingdom and for your neighbour.

We may not know what tests the Lord may have for us, but if we trust Him all the way, we can be sure that what He has planned for us is good and not bad. Sometimes the way in which He leads us may appear to be very strange, but the Lord sees everything from the beginning to the end, while we can see our own present and past only ... Let us ask God in faith and let us believe His promise, and wait to see how He will provide. (ABC 43). And we can be sure that Jesus walked that way before us and took out all that hinders the path to reach the Father's house. The way, up to the mountain, is free for us. Let's walk in confidence. Amen.

Pastor Carlos Walter Winterle, Cape Town, 22 February 2015