

Ann Gillespie

Lent II sermon, Genesis 22:1-14

I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself any idols.

No doubt you recognize these words. They are two of the Ten Commandments found in the book of Exodus. But our Old Testament reading this morning is from the book of Genesis, another iconic passage. I bring these commandments to your attention not only because we will be discussing all ten commandments in depth in the third session of “The Nature of Sin” Series, next Sunday, at 10:00 clock and I would love for you to join us, but also because I believe these commandments shed some light on this troubling story in Genesis.

Abraham is asked by God to sacrifice as a burnt offering his beloved son Isaac, his only son whom he loves. With no further ado, Abraham organizes an expedition for this purpose including two servants, a donkey and the necessary supplies of wood, knife, cords and fire. They travel three days at which point God shows Abraham the mountain in the distance where the

sacrifice is to take place. Abraham commands the servants to wait there, assuring them that both he and Isaac will return. As Abraham and Isaac walk on by themselves, Isaac sees all the supplies for a sacrifice with the exception of the lamb. He questions his father about this omission. Abraham answers, God himself will provide the lamb. This answer must satisfy Isaac as he doesn't speak again. When they arrive at the place God showed him, Abraham builds an altar, arranges the wood, binds his son, and places him on top of the wood. Abraham lifts the knife to kill Isaac and God stops him, saying, Abraham, Don't touch him, now I know you fear God. At that very moment, Abraham looks up and sees a ram, caught in the thicket. The ram then serves as the sacrifice in place of Isaac and Abraham aptly names this place, The Lord will Provide.

How are we to understand these images? Does God want us to sacrifice our children? Could any of us imagine killing our children? Well, if you have teenagers, maybe. I joke because I have two teenage children, but in truth my experience as a parent even of teenagers has been quite the opposite. Every cell in my body feels hard-wired to preserve and protect the life of my children. I cannot fathom the image of Abraham binding up his son, let alone the image of Abraham standing over Isaac, knife in hand. I find it hard to see

the grace here. Abraham utters no hint of protestation to God. In fact, he obeys without so much as a second thought. We are left to assume that had God not interrupted Abraham, he would have killed his son. This is unimaginable to our modern ears. It was unimaginable to ancient ears as well. After all, your heirs were your future. Abraham risked wiping out the promise of a future in the sacrifice of Isaac, his only son. Nothing could have been more valuable or more meaningful than the survival of your tribe through your offspring. But one thing nomadic tribes knew was vulnerability and dependence on God. Some years there was enough food, some years not. Some years there was plenty of water, some years not. One sandstorm, one infection, one childbirth gone wrong and life was extinguished like that. Nomadic tribes, of necessity, shared resources and a common life. Since they were always on the move, they could not accrue great stores of food and supplies. They took with them only what they needed and only what they could carry. They understood well the fragility and tenuousness of their existence. They knew that life was truly a gift from God.

We are at a distinct disadvantage living in our 21st Century world. Yes, we benefit from the technological advances of indoor plumbing and in vitro fertilization, of antibiotics and electricity. But how much farther we are from

depending on God than our ancestors in ancient Israel. How much easier it is to maintain the illusion that we are the ones in control, that we are the creators of our own world. The more material goods we have, the more cyber-capabilities we develop, the more we have to lose, the more we have to protect, the more we must shore up our security to ensure our independence. Our independence is the illusion. Our independence is the idol. Perhaps the most painful realization to emerge out of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 was just how vulnerable we really are. We have lulled ourselves into a false sense of invincibility and self-sufficiency. As a country and a people, we believe we are the masters. We have not attained Abraham's level of faith, putting his full trust in God to provide. Much to our horror and disbelief, in this scene Abraham operates unflinchingly from beginning to end as if God alone is the master.

But this level of faith is a new step for Abraham. He did not start out that way. You recall that much of what motivates the stories of Abraham and his wife Sarah is their desire for an heir. When Abraham was 75, God called him and said, Go. Leave your country. Go to the land I will show you and I will make of you a great nation. Sounds a bit risky but the idea of descendants is appealing so off Abraham goes, taking only his wife and his

nephew Lot. Time passes. Abraham is human. He gets impatient, waiting for God's promise to be made manifest. But God's love and commitment are steadfast and so he makes a covenant with Abraham. Abraham complains that he is still childless, that an offspring born to a slave in his house is not exactly what he had in mind for a descendant. God reassures him, your issue shall be your heir and your descendants will be as numerous as the stars. God's word seems to allay Abraham's concern for a while. Time passes. Now Sarah gets impatient. She continues to be barren so she convinces Abraham to lie with her slave, Hagar. Maybe this is what God meant that Abraham's issue will produce an heir. Hagar gives birth to Ishmael and this infuriates Sarah who eventually kicks Hagar and her illegitimate son out into the wilderness. More time passes. Abraham and Sarah continue their itinerant existence and pretty much give up on the dream of an heir. But God's love and commitment are steadfast so he reaffirms the covenant with Abraham and promises a son to be born to Sarah within the year. Sarah who is now 90, laughs at the absurdity of this idea. But God laughs back, and says, 'Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?' When Abraham is an old man of 100, Sarah gives birth to the son they have been waiting for. Isaac, the answer to their prayers, is born. God finally fulfilled their dreams. But wait, the very next episode in this story is today's

lesson. God commands Abraham to make a sacrifice of Isaac. Why would God seek to destroy this child, the object of all of their hopes and dreams? He doesn't. God fully intends for Isaac to be the descendant through which the Covenant to the people of Israel will be established. But God does seek to destroy the idol that Abraham has made of having an heir. God's love of Abraham is so deep and so strong that he creates the ultimate test for Abraham's faith formation. God exposes the only idol that Abraham placed before God. And in this scene, Abraham passes with flying colors. The longer I sit with this story, I don't believe for a moment that God intended to let Isaac die. After all, the ram was already in place, caught in the thicket. It's just that Abraham couldn't see the ram, until he had been willing to sacrifice that which was dearer to him than God. This unflinching dependence on God was the pivotal step in Abraham's faith journey.

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In Christopher's sermon last week we heard the important question, "What is it that keeps you from God?" Today's lesson about Abraham and Isaac falls on the second Sunday of Lent because we are being asked to sharpen

our inquiry and go deeper into our penitential examination. This week we are asked to look unflinchingly into our hearts and identify idols that we have placed before God, idols that we have convinced ourselves we cannot live without. Oil, our computers, physical ability, a roof over our heads, pension plans, nuclear weapons, and yes, maybe even our children. As we strip ourselves of everything that is not necessary for our wilderness journey, I urge you to lean into the scary places, to examine what it is you believe you can't live without. These idols are like beacons that with terrifying illumination show us where we are truly caught. In the process of becoming faithful this Lent, we will discover that the one thing, the only thing we cannot live without is God.