

The Many Sacrifices and the One Sacrifice

Sermon for the 5th Sunday in Lent

Sermon Text: Genesis 22:1-14



Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” “Here I am,” he replied. ² Then God said, “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 I will show you.” ³ 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. ⁴ On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. ⁵ 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.” ⁶ Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, ⁷ Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, “Father?” “Yes, my son?” Abraham replied. “The fire and wood are here,” Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” ⁸ Abraham answered, “God Himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them went on together. ⁹ When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, “Abraham! Abraham!” “Here I am,” he replied. ¹² “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.” ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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.”

Can there be love without God? Some people say, “yes, of course!” and reference many atheists who often appear to be much better Christians than those who say they are Christians. It is interesting to note that such atheists can’t get away from the moral principles of Christianity, after all, charitable services, human rights, and women’s rights, which they like to point out, have their roots in Christianity. All of this may be interesting today, but it is perhaps even more shocking when we turn the question around and ask whether there can be faith in a God where love is apparently absent. The story about sacrificing Isaac is an example of where any trace of love appears to be missing. It is a gruesome story that makes us recoil in horror and disgust. We would like to cry out to heaven: “Not like this, please!” or perhaps this story makes us ask the question whether we can even believe in a God who expects Abraham to sacrifice his child? We don’t want to lay this indignation aside today because if we think through the indignation to its ultimate conclusion, only then can we come closer to the mystery of this story. It simply must be said that we don’t find the God of love on Mount Moriah. What happens here is not normal, not according to the standards of human coexistence nor according to Christian morality. Nor do we find here a good example to follow. Yet we can’t simply put this text aside in disgust. We cannot because it is a part of our humanity. Yes, it still exists, terrible sacrifices and innocent children’s blood being shed is still happening today. We can’t ignore these things, despite all Christian morality. We only have to think of all the children’s blood that is being shed in all the places throughout the world where there is war. And this is not the only battlefield of children in our sad human history.

What Abraham almost did to Isaac with a raised hand and a butcher’s knife is actually carried out today under clinically clean conditions in many hospitals when unborn children are aborted. In the story of Abraham, we get to know a God who is a stranger to us and from whom we shrink back. However, we also get to know a God

who takes us seriously in our lostness, a God who is close to us even in our darkest hours, a God who not only positions Himself on the high pedestal of so-called Christian morality, but a God who goes where we seem to have been abandoned by God and where love is missing. The challenge to us all is what remains of our faith in God when we are confronted with such atrocities within and around us. Indeed, we don't have to seek out different scenes of murder and death to confront such challenges, we can also see these things in our everyday lives. For there are also days in our personal lives when we can neither understand nor love God and His ways. Days when everything around us becomes dark, when everything becomes blurred and unclear, and where we can no longer recognize the God of love at all. Days when we pray for God to reveal Himself to us, and God reveals Himself in a way that does not seem good to us. In the story of Abraham and Isaac, we are confronted with all these things. God had commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son and Abraham obeyed, as we already know he did, without question or doubt. So the father and son went together, they walked for three days – the father carried the tools for slaughter in his hand so that the son would not injure himself with the knife, while the son carried the wood. During the three days, the two hardly spoke a word. Then this terrible question came up, foreshadowing a dark realization: "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" And the question we must ask ourselves as spectators is when did they both realize that the son was the victim and the father the perpetrator. And that the father is not only capable of killing his beloved son, but also wants to do it!

At this point, we are caught off guard because nothing fits together here. A father's love is broken, and not only is this love broken, but also the love of God Himself because in the background of the whole story is the living God! Yes, on the mountain of Isaac's sacrifice, God comes so close to evil that we could easily mistake Him for evil itself. And isn't it always the case that when we don't understand God, He seems strange and cold to us? Don't we all have our own Mount Moriahs, where we get stuck and must remain in fear and horror and ask ourselves: "Can the living God really expect something like this from me?" We ask ourselves these questions in many situations, especially when a loved one has to die or when the love within us grows cold.

We have our different Moriahs but the Moriah where Abraham was to sacrifice his son was the place where the Temple in Jerusalem would later stand. This is still a place that over 50% of the world's population consider holy. It was also the place where Jesus Christ was crucified and died. So this is the place where Abraham ran to with his heart pounding and tears in his eyes, where his son asked those heartbreaking questions. And God saw it all, He knew the heart of Abraham and above all his path of suffering. Abraham's path to Moriah is also our path to Moriah. It was also God's path with His Son, Jesus Christ. On this mountain, God had to get His hands dirty and come incredibly close to human wickedness. On this mountain, God had to give Himself and pour Himself out, reveal His identity, so that our wickedness could be poured out on Him, and we could attain His holiness. For modern people, all these things are difficult for us to understand. Most people can well understand donating a little money to Bread for the World; they can also well understand donating worn-out clothes to the Red Cross, but a bloody sacrifice on the altar? What's the point? Because at this altar, God gives Himself completely! Because at this altar, the cry for blood and sacrifice is our cry. Because only through this blood can the cry for blood finally be silenced.

In the story of Abraham and his son Isaac, there is also a strange connection with Jesus' walk to the cross. In Abraham's entire walk up Mount Moriah, he anticipates what God would do much later through Jesus Christ: God calls Abraham and without hesitation, Abraham responds: "Yes, Father, yes, most willingly I'll bear what You command me. My will conforms to Your decree, I'll do what You have asked Me." That's what we sing in the well-known Lenten hymn, *A Lamb Goes Uncomplaining Forth*. (LSB 438) Without hesitation, Abraham comes forward, without hesitation Christ goes forth... "though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

(Philippians 2:6-8) Abraham walked with his son for three days. Christ was dead for three days. For three days, God seemed to be dead. For three days, there was no God of love. All hopes were dashed. When Abraham made this journey to Moriah, there must have been an outrage in heaven. And it was an outrage that foreshadowed the much greater outrage that happened when God died on the cross.

On the third day, Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. When he arrived at the foot of the mountain, he ordered the servants to stay behind with the pack animal. Because what he had to discuss with God didn't allow any human witnesses. When it became clear what was going to happen to Jesus, all the disciples left Him. What was about to happen shook their faith in God. Jesus was left alone. Even God seemed to have abandoned Him. At this point, Abraham laid wood on Isaac's back. Soon, he would sacrifice his beloved son with this wood. The words Jesus would cry out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" could also be Abraham's words. Christ took the wood and carried it up the mountain. He would be hung upon it, would be sacrificed with it. Abraham and Isaac could not yet see this. "When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood." He didn't know anything about a lamb, he didn't know that God would actually have another sacrifice ready. At the last moment, God Himself stopped Abraham from performing the terrible sacrifice. He never wanted Isaac to die. The Lord graciously gave a ram to die in place of Isaac. Then, with a solemn oath, He confirmed to His servant the promise that was to shine upon him and his descendants. "So Abraham called the name of that place, 'The Lord will provide.'" Why this particular name? Because the Lord has insight at the crucial moment before the knife hits the boy's heart? Or because HE sees what would happen in the distant future? Another Father would have to sacrifice His Child in this place. Paul, who called Abraham the father of all believers, made something else clear in his letter to the Romans: "If God is for us, who can be against 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 8:31a-32) Perhaps Abraham was led to this Mount Moriah so that we can understand what happened on Golgotha when God Himself tore His only Son from His heart and brought the sacrifice that He then so graciously spared Abraham? Christians recognize the parallels: a father sacrifices his son. Abraham sacrifices Isaac; God, the LORD, sacrifices His Son, Jesus Christ! Just as Abraham suffers on his difficult journey to Mount Moriah, God suffers so deeply because His Son Jesus Christ would die on the cross.

The reading we heard today from the Old Testament is cruel. Just like the many other stories we know from our world. But we can't and mustn't put this story to the side. It affects us all very personally. It also concerns the evil that lurks in our hearts. Every Sunday when we go to church, we carry this evil in our hearts and lay it down here, where animals were once slaughtered. In this place where animals were once sacrificed, we take a little bread and a little wine as a substitute. At this moment, we receive Christ Himself. In a wonderful way, we then become brothers and sisters in faith with Abraham. The lamb that God gave to Abraham is now the body and blood of Jesus Christ. God gives us Christ as a once and for all sacrifice, and we no longer have to sacrifice! And evil is torn from our hearts! Amen.