

Pastor Chris Matthis
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Lent 1, Series B
Saturday, February 17th, 2018
Sunday, February 18th, 2018

Sermon: Where Is the Lamb?

Text: Genesis 22:1-19

Focus: Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Function: That they would praise God for his abundant mercy and grace in Jesus' sacrifice on cross.

Structure: Multiple Images

Locus: "I believe that Jesus Christ... has redeemed me...; not with gold or silver, but with His holy precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death..." (SC, 2nd Article of Apostles' Creed).

Introduction

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. The Word of God for our meditation today is the sacrifice of Isaac from Genesis 22. It is one of the most horrible and harrowing stories in all of Scripture, mystifying Jewish rabbis and Christian theologians for literally *thousands* of years. What are we to make of this troubling tale, this Bible story that comes straight out of that strange, nightmarish realm in which we wonder if God is truly good and loving? For what kind of God could command a man of faith to "take your son, your only son..., whom you love" and to go kill him on a mountain (Gen. 22:1, ESV)?¹

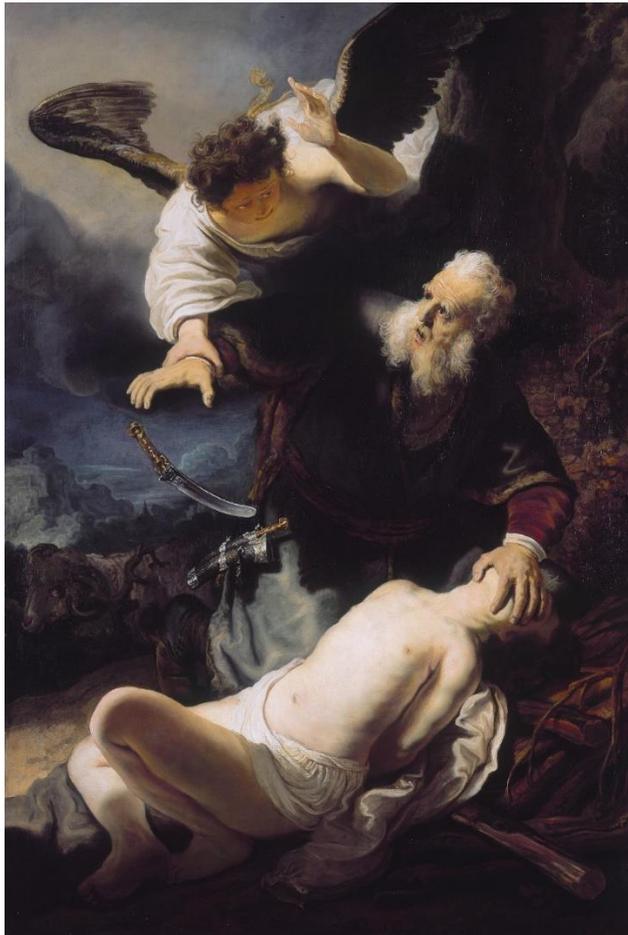
To aid our meditation, I present two images for you to contemplate (printed on a bulletin insert). Both are paintings titled *The Sacrifice of Isaac*. One is a masterwork by Rembrandt from 1635.² The other is a modern work by Chagall dating from 1966. And while both of these

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

² I had the privilege to see this painting on display at the Altes Pinothek art museum in Munich, Germany, in October 2017.

images focus on the same Bible story, they present it very differently. Rembrandt's painting is an action shot capturing Abraham in the act. Chagall's painting, on the other hand, transforms the scene into a foreshadowing of later, greater suffering by the Jewish people, including the Holocaust and the crucifixion of Jesus. Rembrandt captures the *moment*; Chagall gives us *meaning*. Rembrandt presents *history* while Chagall invokes *mystery*.

First Image: Rembrandt's *Sacrifice of Isaac* (1635)



Rembrandt's painting shows Abraham at the very moment that the angel of Yahweh stays his hand and spares the life of Isaac. The angel grips Abraham's right wrist tightly, shaking loose the knife that falls from his hand. Abraham looks at the angel in astonishment even as his left hand presses down on Isaac's face, exposing his neck for the fatal cut. Rembrandt forces us to

imagine the expression on the boy's face, whether abject terror or quiet submission, because we cannot see it. Nor does the Bible tell us what Isaac thought or said as his father drew the knife to take his life. The only thing Isaac says in the entire account is his question in verse 7: "My father.... Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"

Abraham's answer was only, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son" (v. 8). It wasn't a lie, but it wasn't a straight answer either. Martin Luther suggests that Abraham is sparing his son the torture of knowing what is to come, but we cannot be sure.³

We also wonder what must have gone through Abraham's head when God "tested" him and commanded, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you" (Gen. 22:2). There are echoes here of Yahweh's first call to Abraham in Genesis 12 when he said, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (12:1). God kept demanding action without providing all the details—or the itinerary.

Yet faithful Abraham, trusting God's promises, was always ready to obey. Moses tells us that early the very next morning, Abraham got up, saddled the donkey, and took Isaac and the servants along with him towards the mountains. He didn't hesitate or skip a beat. He obeyed. And yet we cannot comprehend what could compel a person to obey such a command. Besides the fact that child sacrifice was unethical and immoral—prohibited hundreds of years later by the Mosaic law (Lev. 18:21; 20:1-5; Deut. 12:31; 18:10)—there was the heartbreaking loss of yet another son. Abraham's wife Sarah already forced him to drive away Ishmael, his son by the

³ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 21-25*, vol. 4 in *Luther's Works*, trans. George V. Schick, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 112.

slave woman Hagar. Sarah was resentful of Ishmael and jealous of him for Isaac's sake, so she forced Abraham to send away his firstborn son.

Now God was going to take away his only remaining son, the son he loved more than life itself. For how many prayers and tears had been spent waiting for Isaac to be born? He was the son of promise, the one who would carry forth the Messianic line and God's promise that Abraham would be the father of many nations (Gen. 21:12). Now, it seemed, none of that mattered anymore. God reneged on his promise and was going to take away the person Abraham loved more than anyone else in the world. How could a good and loving God do such a thing? Yet, as the Psalmist says, God consumes like a moth what is dear to us (Ps. 39:11).

Of course, we know that God was only testing Abraham. "*Only*" testing, we say. Hah! What do we know of Abraham's test?! Abraham didn't understand why God was making him do this. He only knew the reality of the suffering. How could he have known that God would spare Isaac at the last moment? The New Testament tells us that "by faith" Abraham reasoned that God would raise Isaac from the dead, but he had no clear Word of the Lord. All he knew was that Yahweh commanded a sacrifice, and he had to obey. For, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, "Only those who obey believe" (*Cost of Discipleship*).

"Where is the lamb?" Isaac asked on the way to the mountain where the murder would occur. Where is the lamb in the painting? I know it is very difficult to see, but in the background, just to the left of the knife and above Isaac's knee, is a dark, shadowy image of a ram caught in the bushes. "And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place, '[Yahweh] will provide,' as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided" (Gen. 22:14).

God rewarded Abraham and blessed him for his obedience. “Now I know that you fear God, seeing that you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me” (v. 12). “Now I know,” God said. He needed proof that Abraham believed and trusted him. Abraham’s obedience was the proof in the pudding. And so he passed the test. In the New Testament, the apostle James uses this story as support that faith without works is dead. We are not saved by our works, but our works are the fruit of our faith. Abraham proved *his* faith by his willing obedience to God’s command, no matter how strange and terrible it may have seemed. And so God promised to bless Abraham: “Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore” (vv. 16-17). So the Lord comforted Abraham and reassured him of his promises.

What did Isaac think about all of this? We do not know. He never says. And Rembrandt hides his face. In his book *Fear and Trembling*, Søren Kierkegaard imagines that Isaac never spoke of it again, but that is Kierkegaard, not the Word of the Lord.

Second Image: Chagall’s *Sacrifice of Isaac* (1966)



Chagall's painting is very different. As I said before, if Rembrandt captures the moment, Chagall proclaims the *meaning* of this event. Rembrandt's painting illustrates *history*, but Chagall reveals to us the *mystery*. Chagall portrays the same figures as Rembrandt: Abraham holding the knife, Isaac stretched out on the altar, the angel reaching down from heaven, and even the animal caught in the thicket. But Chagall also shows us more. See far in the background, almost out of frame, far into the future, an image of Christ carrying his cross to Mt. Calvary.

Chagall makes plain what we already should have recognized, that the sacrifice of Isaac is a type for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. In literature such as the Bible, a "type" is a person or event that foreshadows a later, greater person or event. The sacrifice of Isaac on Mount Moriah is a foreshadowing of the later, greater sacrifice of Jesus on the cross for our sins. There are echoes throughout our Old Testament lesson that drive this point home.

The refrain in Genesis 22 is that Isaac is Abraham's "only son" (Gen 22:2). Three times in this chapter Yahweh refers to Isaac as Abraham's "only son" (vv. 2, 12, 16). The Septuagint, which is the Greek Old Testament, calls Isaac his "*beloved son*."⁴ Both of these terms, "only son" and "beloved son," put us in mind of Jesus. For at his Baptism, the voice from heaven says to Jesus, "You are my *beloved Son*" (Mark 1:11). And in John 3:16, that most famous of all Bible verses, Jesus gives us the Gospel in a nutshell: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his *only Son*, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

Isaac was Abraham's beloved son, his "only son." Jesus is *God's* beloved Son, his "only-begotten Son" (KJV). And just as Abraham put the wood for the fire on Isaac's back, so also God laid a wooden beam on Jesus' shoulders, as he carried his cross on his back to Golgotha. Yet unlike Isaac, God did *not* spare Jesus. Rather, he poured out the fire of all his wrath against sin, destroying his body on the cross. Isaac was spared the fire and the knife. But God did not spare Jesus the nails, the spear, or his righteous anger.

We have no clue what Isaac thought when Abraham raised his hand against his only son. But we *do* know what Jesus thought: "*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani*," which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" (Mark 15:34). On the cross Jesus felt completely abandoned and rejected by God in his most desperate moment. And he did it for you and me.

Why didn't God spare Jesus? Because "sin demands a heavy price" (Wendy Talbot). Our salvation cost God dearly. It cost him the life of his Son. But God offered him up on the altar of the cross so that we would *know* that God loves us. "For 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?" (Rom. 8:32). "But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for

⁴ Greek: *tou huiou sou tou agapētou*.

us” (Rom. 5:8). After the sacrifice of Isaac, God told Abraham, “Now I know that you love and trust me.” After the death of Jesus, we can say, “Now I know that God loves us—that God loves *me!*”

On his journey to Mount Moriah, Isaac asked his father, “Where is the lamb?” God provided a ram as a substitute for Isaac, and his life was spared. But Jesus is our lamb, as John the Baptist declared: “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).

Where is the lamb in Chagall’s painting? Yes, there is a little animal hiding behind the tree. But even more importantly, the Lamb is carrying the tree of the cross up the hill in the far corner. Jesus is the Lamb.

As I close today, I want to share with you a very powerful, moving song that shows the connections between the sacrifice of Isaac and Jesus’ death on the cross. It’s called “Where Is the Lamb?” by Wendy Talbot from her album *People of Promise*. We’ve provided the lyrics for you in the bulletin so you can read along while you listen. Thank you! Amen.

*A father walked with his only son,
The light of his life, his beloved one.
On the son’s strong back the wood was tied.
As they climbed the hill, the son inquired,*

*“Where is the lamb?
Where is the lamb?”
And Abraham cried, “My son must die!
He is the lamb.”*

*And he tied his son, and he raised his knife
For the Lord had commanded the sacrifice.
But the angel cried, “Spare the boy!”
And the two embraced in tears of joy.*

*Where is the lamb?
Where is the lamb?
And Abraham cried, “My son arise!*

There is a lamb.”

*“O blessed are you Abraham,
Who would give your son at my command.
You have not withheld your best from me.
For this I give my best for thee.”*

*A Father walked with his only Son,
The light of his life, his beloved one.
On the Son’s strong back the wood was tied
For sin demands a heavy price.*

*Where is the Lamb?
Where is the Lamb?
And the Lord God cried, “My Son must die.
He is the Lamb.”
And the Lord God cried, “My Son arise!
He is the Lamb!”*