

Pastor Chris Matthis
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Lent 1, Series B
Saturday, February 20th, 2021
Sunday, February 21st, 2021

Sermon: Where Is the Lamb?¹

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, or, as the Jewish rabbis call it, the *Binding* of Isaac (because Isaac is never actually sacrificed in the story). Yet regardless of what you call it, this is one of the most 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)?²

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.³

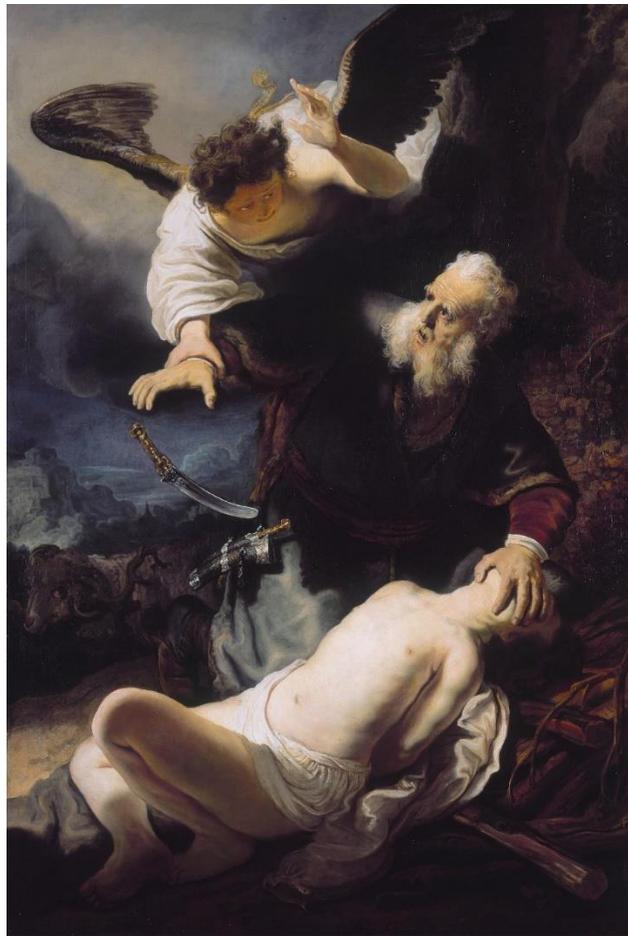
¹ An earlier version of this sermon was originally preached at Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado on Sunday, February 18th, 2018.

² All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

³ I had the privilege to see this painting on display at the Altes Pinothek art museum in Munich, Germany, in October 2017.

The other is a modern work by Chagall. And while both of these images focus on the same Bible story, they present it very differently. Rembrandt's painting is an action shot capturing Abraham in the very act of slaughter. Chagall's painting, on the other hand, transforms the scene into a foreshadowing of later, greater suffering by the Jewish people, including the crucifixion of Jesus and the Holocaust. 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, which measures at over 4 ft. by 6 ft., 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 pushes 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.⁴ 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.⁵

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). God kept demanding action without providing all the details—or the itinerary. I am certain you can relate to that in your own life. As the Bible says, "we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7). God doesn't reveal his masterplan in this life.

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 had a long journey ahead, and daylight was not to be wasted. Abraham simply obeyed.

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

⁴ For another artist's imagining of Isaac's terror, see Caravaggio's depiction of this scene.

⁵ 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.

Mosaic law (Lev. 18:21; 20:1-5; Deut. 12:31; 18:10)—there was the heartbreaking loss of Abraham’s beloved son—the son of promise.

Now God was going to take away his only remaining son, whom he loved more than life itself. How many prayers, tears, and *years* had been spent waiting for Isaac to be born? He was 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).

Of course, we know that God was only testing Abraham. “*Only*” testing, we say. Hah! What do we know of Abraham’s test?! We have the privileged point of view from the *other* side of this event. But Abraham didn’t understand why God made him do this. He only knew the reality of his suffering—and Isaac’s. How could he have known that God would spare Isaac at the last moment? The New Testament tells us that “by faith” Abraham reasoned God could 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 must obey.

“Where is the lamb?” Isaac asked on the way to the mountain where the sacrifice would take place.

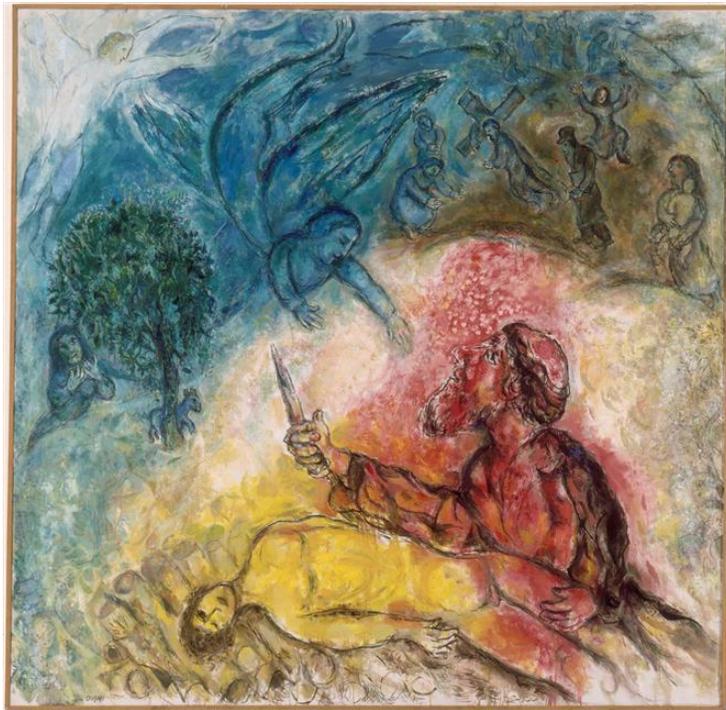
Where is the lamb in the painting? I know it is very difficult to see, but in the background, just to the left of the knife and above Isaac’s knee, is a dark, shadowy image of a ram caught in the bushes. “And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place *Yahweh-yireh*, “The LORD 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. Of course, the Almighty, omniscient God knew all along what Abraham would do. But *Abraham* needed to see the result of this test in order to confirm his own faith and trust in God and to show that he would do whatever God

So God blessed 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).

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



Now we turn to our second image. Chagall’s painting is very different than Rembrandt’s. 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 Biblical theology, 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 Christ on the cross at Mt. Calvary 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*.”⁶ 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 our 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,

⁶ Greek: *tou huiou sou tou agapētou*.

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

So also for us, God provided another Lamb: Jesus Christ. As John the Baptist declared, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). Jesus takes away the sin of the world. He takes away *your* sins—and mine. He is the other Lamb who died for you and me. Where is the Lamb? He is on the cross, bleeding and breathing his last for us and for our salvation. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.