

Lenten Midweek 3, 2013

Text: Genesis 22:1-18

Title: The Substitute

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Reading stories from the Bible, especially reading stories from the Old Testament is tricky. It can get confusing. We wonder things like, “How do I fit in to the story?” “Which one of the characters do I identify with?” “What does this mean for me?” “What do I do with people like Abraham or Moses or David?”

Sometimes the characters in the stories are examples for us, either of good attitudes or behavior that we should try to imitate or examples of evil or bad behavior that we should avoid.

Sometimes we see God at work in the lives of His people and we’re reminded of how He loves and cares for us, too.

But the Old Testament is more than just examples, or moralistic stories like Aesop’s fables. They don’t just teach us a lesson about how to live your life- “Don’t act like Cain, act like Abel.”

Take tonight’s story is about Abraham and Isaac. You probably know the story well.

Abraham has waited all his life for a son. But then after he is given a son in his old age, the Lord asks him to sacrifice him, to take his life.

Abraham listens to God and obeys. He is willing to do the unthinkable, to kill his only son. At the last moment the angel stops Abraham’s hand, and Isaac is allowed to live.

Our tendency is to place ourselves in Abraham’s shoes. He is certainly an example of faith and trust in God. He is also an example of faithful giving, being willing to give everything to God without holding anything back.

But if that’s all we get out of the story, then we are in trouble. We can never live up to Abraham’s example.

I know that I could never do what Abraham did. Could you? Could you actually cut the throat of your child because God told you to? I don’t think I could have even started out on the trip to the mountain, let alone tie up my child and prepare him for sacrifice. Our faith is shallow and weak. We don’t trust God and we fail all the time when our faith is tested.

When things don’t go our way, when the going gets tough, we have doubts and we question God, rather than trusting Him completely.

We’re also unwilling to give the way that Abraham gave. I would have a hard time giving up someone I loved so much. In fact, we have a hard time giving up anything to the Lord. Forget

our firstborn son, most of us have a hard time giving even a small percentage of our income to Lord, or a few hours a week in prayer and meditation on His Word. We're greedy and selfish. When you put your offering in the plate, it's so easy to think of all the other things you would have rather done with the money.

So if all we get out of tonight's story is that we need to trust God more and be more giving, then we are in trouble.

But let's step back a minute, and let's take another look at this story.

Whenever you're reading a story in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, the key is to look for Jesus. Where do you find Jesus in the story? What person or action points forward to Jesus?

In tonight's story, it's clearly the lamb. Jesus is the Lamb of God, the perfect, final offering. He is the one who is killed, who dies on the cross.

So if Jesus is the lamb, then who are you? Where do you fit into the story?

Instead of focusing on Abraham, take a look at Isaac.

Like Isaac you are destined to die. Your sin has earned you as much. There's no point in resisting, there's no point in arguing. You are laid upon the altar and the knife is at your throat. There's nothing you can do to escape. You are helpless.

Yet at the very last moment, you are saved. Another victim takes your place. The ram, the male sheep dies in your place and you are set free.

Imagine how Isaac must have felt going through this experience. He didn't know how it was going to end until the very last moment. He was probably afraid and terrified going through it all.

Most of us grew up knowing the endings of these Bible stories. We knew that the angel would rescue Isaac. We knew that Noah would be saved in the ark, that the Israelites would be set free through the Red Sea, that Daniel would survive the lions and Jonah would survive the fish, that Job would get all his stuff back. We know how these stories end.

But none of these people knew the endings at the time they were living through them. None of them knew exactly how it would end. But they trusted in God, even when things were going bad around them. Even when the waters rose, when the Egyptians were at their backs, when they were sinking in the sea or in the lion's den, when the knife was at their throat, they trusted in God.

Sometimes the salvation came in this life. Sometimes God rescued them before they died. But sometimes He didn't. Sometimes there was no miraculous rescue, no *Deus ex machina*, when God intervened at the last moment. God didn't stop Cain from killing Abel. God didn't stop

Herod from killing those little baby boys. God didn't even stop the Romans and the Jews from killing His only Son.

And here's the point. Even if the rescue doesn't come in this life, even if the knife of cancer or heart disease, or Alzheimer's, or whatever else strikes you down, you can know for sure that you will be saved in the life to come, in the resurrection.

This is why Abraham was willing to kill his own son. He knew that the Lord would raise him from the dead. He knew death would not be the end of Isaac.

Death will not be the end for you, either, because it was not the end for Jesus Christ. This story does not end when Abraham and Isaac go back down the mountain. It doesn't end when Abraham and Isaac eventually die. It doesn't even end when Jesus, the Lamb of God, dies on the cross.

The end comes with Easter and the resurrection, new life beyond the grave. Death does not get the last word. Life gets the last word.

It's the same for you, too. Even if the future looks scary and uncertain. Even if you see the wood and the knife and it looks like the end is near. God will provide the lamb, He will die in your place so that one day you will be set free.