

SIGHT UNSEEN
BY FAITH, ABRAHAM
A SERMON BASED ON GENESIS 22:1-18
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
NIAGARA FALLS, ONTARIO
SUNDAY, JANUARY 13, 2008
10:30 a.m.

It's one of my favourite Fred Craddock stories.

He tells about his friend Glenn Adsit,

“A schoolmate from years ago ministered mostly in China.

He was under house arrest in China

when the soldiers came one day and said,

‘You can return to America.’

They were celebrating,

and the soldiers said,

‘You can take two hundred pounds with you.’

Well they'd been there for years.

Two hundred pounds.

They got the scales and started the family arguments:

two children, wife, husband.

Must have this vase.

Well this is a new typewriter.

What about my books?

What about this?

And they weighed everything,
and they took it off.

Weighed this and took it off.

and weighed this and took it off.

and weighed this and took it off.

and finally, right on the dot,

two hundred pounds.

The soldiers came.

Did you weigh everything?

Yes.

You weighed the kids?

No, we didn't.

Weigh the kids.

And in a moment, typewriter, books and vase,

they all became trash.

As Abraham lifted up his long awaited, promised son upon the altar,
they had built.

I wonder how much Isaac weighed.

I think he weighed more than anything.

More than anything.

More than anything, Abraham had waited for a son.

God had promised heirs,

a long, long time ago.

Too many times Abraham would have said to his wife Sarah,

“I don’t know,

I guess we have to wait.”

They got themselves into some pretty good messes,

because they couldn’t wait

and tried to take things into their own hands.

They waited so long,

that when God finally sent news that it was time,

that they would have a son,

Sarah thought it was too late.

She laughed at God's message.

But Isaac came.

His name means laughter,

The laughter came to them and there was joy.

Their sense of preciousness of what they had

been given, and waited so long for was immense.

Isaac weighed more than anything.

God called Abraham again.

'Abraham',

'Here I am' Abraham answered.

'Take your son, your only son, whom you love,

and go to the region of Moriah.

Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering

on one of the mountains I will tell you about.'

Hand him over.

He weighs too much to bring with you.

In the text,

Abraham doesn't say anything.

He doesn't argue with God or challenge God.

But one commentator describes how this passage drags its feet.

Abraham wasn't rushing to get this done.

Our translation has smoothed it all out.

But it has all the reluctance, plodding and procrastination
of getting ready to undertake an undesirable task,

Abraham got up.

He saddled the donkey.

He got two servants and Isaac.

He chopped wood.

He set out.

They journeyed for three days – all was silent.

They got there.

He put the wood on Isaac's shoulders.

Sometimes, we need our faith to move slowly.

After all this, it was Issac who spoke first.

“Father!”

Abraham gives him the answer he gave God,

An answer of presence and receptivity.

‘Here I am.’

Isaac said, “I see the wood.

I see the fire, ready to light the altar.

Where is the sacrifice?”

Abraham answers by faith, ‘God will provide.’

This week I saw a cartoon posted online.

It was posted by a grammar snob.

Abraham and Issac are at the newly built altar.

Abraham says, ‘God will provide Issac.’

Issac a little worried says, ‘Tell me there is a comma in there Dad!!’

God will provide, Issac.

The reluctant plodding continues, up the mountain.

Abraham builds the altar.

He puts the wood on it.

He binds Isaac.

He puts Isaac on the altar.

He lifts the knife.

Then, in the nick of time,

God calls again.

“Abraham.”

By faith, Abraham answers.

‘Here I am, Lord.’

God said,

“Do not lay a hand on the boy.

Do not do anything to him.

I know now that you fear God,

because you have held nothing back from me.

Not even your only Son.”

Abraham lifted his eyes.

And there, in the thicket,

was the lamb of God’s provision,

offered in place of Isaac.

God will provide.

Centuries later,

the apostle Paul looked in the thicket,
and saw the lamb of God's provision in Jesus.

'If God is for us,

who is against us?

He who did not withhold his own son,

but gave him up for all of us,

will he not give us all things?'

This story of Abraham and Isaac can be a horrific and unsettling story.

What kind of God asks for something like that?

What kind of God would do that to someone?

Hand him over.

He weighs too much.

Will Willimon is a pastor who quotes a man

from a discussion group he held

after presenting this story.

The man said,

“I’ll tell you the meaning this story has for me.

I’ve decided that my family and I are looking for another church!”

Willimon said in astonishment,

Wait? What?! Why?

‘Because when I look at that sort of God,

the God of Abraham,

I feel I’m near a real God,

not the sort of dignified, businesslike,

Rotary Club god we chatter about here on Sunday mornings.

Abraham’s God could blow a man to bits,

ask for everything from a person and then want more. –

I want to know that God.”

Heavy.

Heavy stuff.

There is weight there.

Hand it over. Leave it behind.

You'll be too heavy to make it to freedom otherwise.

You better weigh the kids.

You better weigh your stuff.

You better weigh your money.

You better weigh your security.

You better weigh your anger.

You better weigh your success.

You better weigh whatever it is that you won't let go,

or that won't let go of you.

You better weigh whatever you think

is anything and everything and all that.

I'm sure Isaac weighed more than anything.

By handing him over to God,

By having hands completely empty,

God was able to give Abraham everything.

The freedom to live life with God.

The freedom of seeing God provide.

The assurance that life can be lived by faith.

Until you heave whatever weight you're carrying,
up onto the altar,
you won't be able to lift your eyes
to see that God has provided and will provide
a lamb in the thicket for you.

Until you heave whatever weight you're carrying
up onto the altar
you won't be able to own
the purposes God has for you.

Through you,
God can abundantly bless.
Not just you. But this world.
God can bring blessing through you,
more than you could have considered.
But it's best effected when you are hands free.

Three times Abraham says, 'Here I am.'

Twice to God,

once to his son.

It was a posture of presence and receptivity.

It is a statement of offering.

Here I am.

God said to Abraham,

that kind of love,

that kind of obedience to me,

that willingness to put it all back into God's hands,

that is the way,

all peoples on earth will be blessed.

It is God's intention to bless.

That kind of abundant blessing requires open hands.

In order to receive, but also in order to let go.

If you want to know *that* God,

It requires you to say "Here I am."

when he calls your name.

What carries the weight in your life?

What are you attached to?

Who are you attached to?

In John 15 Jesus uses the metaphor of a vine and branches

to describe our relationship with him.

He says, "I am the vine. You are the branches."

If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit.

Apart from me, you can do nothing.

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you,

remain in my love.

That word remain is like the word abide

abide in, stay in, dwell in, live in

my love.

Where are you attached?

Jesus says, me.

Stay attached to me.

God wants to be first in your life.

I'm the kind of person who wants to know the commitment up front.

I want to know how much this weighs and what I get to bring with me.

It prompts me to ask

What exactly am I signing up for here, this being a Christian?

How long is this contract?

What is expected of me?

How much will this faith require of me?

How far am I going to take this?

What is it I'll be working on here?

What is it I'm doing with my faith?

How will I know when I'm finished?

What does putting God first look like?

I don't think they are the kind of questions

we typically ask ourselves about our faith.

We believe in the Rotary Club God.

We trust the Gentle Jesus, meek and mild.

We receive comfort from our faith.

We come to worship - some Sundays.

We study the Bible a little bit.

Give a little bit.

Serve a little bit.

Pray a little bit - and that seems about right.

'How can I make God number one in my life?'

isn't the question we typically ask ourselves.

Can I heave it all up on the altar?

That isn't the question we really want asked.

How far is this going to go?

That's the question we ask our crazy religious relatives.

How far are you going to take this, this putting God first?

Oh wait, you are the crazy religious relatives.

So it's the question they ask you.

How far are you going to take this?

Nicaragua? Are you going to go to Nicaragua?

You are going to go again?

That's taking things a little far don't you think?

You are giving money so someone
can go help build a church in Nicaragua?
That's pretty far out there.
You could do something nice for yourself.
We have people right here you should help.
I always find it interesting that people
are always quite generous with their opinions
of how you should direct your generosity.

You are going to a Bible Study?
Weren't you just at church on Sunday?
Isn't that like, twice in a week?
How far are you taking this?

You are going to make sure your kids get to church and develop their faith
on a Sunday?
Instead of soccer, hockey, baseball, softball,
t-ball, dance, jazz, tap, ballet, hip hop,
football, curling, ringette, or swimming?
That seems like taking things a little too far.

Tell your adult kids

you are thinking about putting the church in your will
and watch the reaction.

They may ask for power of attorney.

You may well be told that you are definitely taking things too far now.

But today the question is for you.

How far, by faith, can you take this putting God first?

When God taps you on the shoulder, can you say,

“Here I am.”

My favourite quote about ministry comes

from an author named Dan Brown,

not the DaVinci Code guy, the church guy,

He wrote,

“The work of ministry is not getting the work done.

It is using the work to get the people done.”

There is another quote out there, I don't know where it came from

but it's helpful.

“The way you can tell if you have a servant heart,

is by the way you react
when you are treated like a servant.”

Day by day, you will have repeating opportunities
to see more of Christ in your life,
to put Christ first in your life
with every word, every decision, every act,
you have a chance to see Jesus increase.
With the simple response, “Here I am.”

You will have repeating opportunities to decrease,
weigh and leave behind,
those selfish, self-centred and prideful parts of yourself,
the other things you have made into gods,
The parts that attach you to this world,
can be heaved up onto the altar,
anticipating that God will provide.

Christ came to serve
and so being fully mature in Christ,

means taking on the nature of a servant.

Everything we do in our life of faith,
is to bring us to a point of being fully mature in Christ,
being like Christ.

fully serving,
putting it all on the table.

It seems to be an oxymoron.

Two things that side by side seem incapable of going together.

Jesus said, "Lose your life to find it."

At first it doesn't make sense.

But if you've trained a dog to play ball you can understand this.

Many dogs love to chase ball.

They love to bring it back.

They are not always so keen to let it go.

To teach a dog to give up the ball,

I was taught to have something the dog wants more
in my hand,

something like a bit of bacon.

To get the bacon,

he has to let go of the ball.

To find your life, Jesus says, you must lose it.

Putting it all on the table, with a 'Here I am.'

God will provide more blessing through you than you dared imagine.

Fred Craddock tells another story from his role as pastor.

"It was without the blink of an eye

that a thirty-something year old said to me,

'Let's see now,

isn't it next Sunday that my daughter was going to be baptized?'

Fred said, 'Yeah, it's next Sunday.'

Well... she has a dance recital next Sunday.'

Fred said, 'well, the baptism is Sunday morning.'

Well... her recital is at 10:30.'

'On Sunday morning, Fred said.

'Yeah, the dance studio holds its recitals on Sunday morning.

Fred said, 'On Sunday morning?'

And he said, 'Then we have a decision to make, don't we?'

Every day has its altar.

Every day is an opportunity to heave something up there
that weighs too much.

Every day is an opportunity to see God provide.

Every day is an opportunity for God to bless through you.

When God calls on you,

By faith, may you answer,

'Here I am Lord',

with a willingness to put it all on the table.

Amen.