

**The Rev. David Booman**

**Genesis 22**

**St. Michael's**

**October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2021**

Well, it's hard to believe this is my last Sunday. As I mentioned a few weeks ago, the past ten years have been the best years of my life. You have blessed me more than I can say. And I've grown so much on this journey. Ten years ago, in my first sermon I assured you I was old enough to have my driver's license. Perhaps, I now look old enough to have a glass of wine.

One very interesting thing however, has to do with today's Old Testament passage. The past few months we've been preaching through a sermon series on Genesis. And today we come to Genesis 22. But remarkably, while reading through some old journals recently, I discovered that on Wednesday, February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2012, the day Fr. Al called me to St. Michael's, the daily office reading was *also* Genesis 22. And so I can't help but wonder if God is not gently encouraging us—that today is a day of completion, and that there's a season for everything, including saying goodbye.

This morning I'd like to reflect with you on our passage from Genesis. And I'd like to explore the nature of faith. This passage is the paradigmatic expression of faith in the OT. Indeed, the great philosopher Soren Kierkegaard wrote an entire book exploring what this passage tells us about faith. And I'd especially like to focus on verse 2 where God gives Abraham three commands: *'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.'*

In this verse we see three crucial dimensions to faith, that God often calls his people:

1. To Take
2. To Go
3. To Offer

So let's look at each of these in turn...But first, it's important to note that God is *speaking* to Abraham. Our God is a God who speaks. He's not an unmoved mover, or some life force. He's living and active and dynamic. And he talks to us! Through His Word and through His Spirit.

I'm reminded of ten years ago, when I was in St. Michael's search process. Caity and I worshipped here one Sunday morning, and after the service we went out under the portico, where we were approached by an older woman we'd

never met before. She came right up to us and said, *'I saw you across the balcony...and God told me to pray for you.'* It was Meta Moore, whom many of you will remember. Now she had no idea we were in a search process and needed prayer, and yet God *spoke* to her. And for Caity and me it was confirmation that God was with us and guiding us.

And so I want to emphasize that God's speaking is a crucial piece of the life of faith. And it makes Christian faith different from many others. Because Christian faith does not mean simply intellectual assent. It's not believing in a *principle or a philosophy*, but rather, it's trusting in a *person*. And this is what makes faith so interesting.

Kierkegaard points out that there are basically three ways people can live their lives. We can live aesthetically, ethically, or by faith.

By aesthetically he means that we can live for pleasure and self-gratification. We can simply do what feels right. By ethically he means we can live according to reason. We can do our duty in compliance with ethical norms.

But then Kierkegaard points out that faith often transcends the world of ethics. And that God often calls us to do things that make no worldly sense at all, that do not seem reasonable.

*'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love...and offer him as a burnt offering.'* This command makes no aesthetic or ethical sense.

After all, this is the child of promise. For twenty-five years God has been telling Abraham that he will be the father of a nation. And so, in a sense, Abraham is not only sacrificing Isaac, he's also sacrificing himself. Because it's only through Isaac that Abraham will have any lasting influence on the world. His entire life has been wrapped up in the miraculous birth of this son, who will beget a nation, that will bless the world. Abraham is not just losing one of his favorite things, but *everything* He's lived for. Everything that's given his life meaning. His very identity. Past, present, and future. He's being called to destroy it with his bare hands.

And notice how painfully specific God is...your son...your only son...Isaac...whom you love. Sometimes God calls us to sacrifice things that are not dispensable, but supremely precious.

And doesn't Jesus say something similar? *"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple...therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.'*

Now of course, by hate, Jesus doesn't mean we should despise our family. This is a Jewish idiom. But it does mean we are to relativize our family in relation to God. And we are to be prepared to *choose God over* our family if it comes to that.

Over the last year, the most impactful book I've read is the Letters of Franz Jaggerstatter from prison. Jagerstatter was a simple Austrian farmer who refused to swear allegiance to Hitler. Consequently, he was imprisoned and beheaded, leaving behind a wife and three daughters. But the most gut-wrenching thing, is that his family, friends, and priest urged him to take the oath. They said God would understand, and that it was his duty to his family.

And yet, hours before his death, Jagerstatter wrote, *'Neither prison nor chains nor sentence of death can rob a man of Faith. God gives so much strength that it's possible to bear any suffering.... People worry about the obligations of conscience as they concern my wife and children. But I cannot believe that, just because one has a wife and children, a man is free to offend God.'*

Yes, sometimes, even today, God calls us to count the cost. And to take in our hands things we can't imagine living without. A dream job, a lifestyle, a relationship, a security, a belief system, a cherished sin. As Bonhoeffer notes, there is a cost to discipleship. And if the God we follow never calls us to make real sacrifices, how do we know our deity is not simply a 'designer god' of our own making? In the words of Tim Keller, a 'Stepford God.'

And so, point one, the life of faith often involves *taking* what is most precious to us, recognizing how much we love it, and then relinquishing our hold.

And this leads us to point 2: God not only calls his people to take, but also to go. *'Take your son, your only son Isaac...and GO to the land of Moriah.* Now this command to 'GO' may not appear significant, but it would have rung enormous bells for Abraham. Because it echoes another command to GO back in chapter 12, *'GO from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land I will show you.'* Yes, the life of faith is often characterized by being called out and sent to new places. From Abraham and Moses, to Paul and Christians everywhere... *'GO and make disciples of all nations.'*

I'm reminded of my great-great-Grandfather Halvor Halvorsen, who heard God's call and traveled 4,000 miles from Norway, to pastor a church in Wisconsin. And of course so many missionaries over the centuries were sent to distant lands, taking their coffins with them, knowing they would never return. When I was in India a few years ago I met a lady named Ruth. She was a British

music teacher. And when she heard the call to GO, she sold everything she had, moved permanently to India, to teach children how to play the violin.

Now your call to 'GO' ... may not necessarily be to distant lands, but it will certainly be outside of your comfort zone. *You can bank on that.* It might be serving folks in the inner city, or in rural areas. It might be serving in a prison. It might be stepping out in evangelism. It might be a new career path. Or it might simply be standing for truth more publicly than you ever have before. Perhaps participating in a March for Life, being a voice for the voiceless and attracting the scorn of your neighbors.

Whatever it is, God calls us all to GO in sacrificial ways.

And once we arrive at our destination, we're ready for the third dimension of faith. God not only calls us to TAKE what we cherish and count the cost, and then to GO wherever he leads, but finally, God calls us to OFFER him all that we have. 'Go to the land of Moriah and OFFER Isaac as a burnt offering.'

My friends, there's no way around the horror of this command. To offer a burnt offering does not simply mean to kill Isaac and walk away. A burnt offering meant to slice the throat with a knife, to dismember, and then to burn the carcass to ashes.

During the Bishop's search process, I was struck by something said by our Bishop-elect Chip Edgar. He said that throughout his ministry he's been guided by one question, *'Where is the place where the kernel of my life can fall to the ground and die, and bear fruit for the kingdom?'*

You know, in Romans 12 when Paul urges us to 'present our bodies as living sacrifices' he's not just using flowery language. This is the call of Christ to everyone everywhere. It's an inescapable part of what it means to walk by faith. As George McDonald wrote, *'When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.'*

And so we see Abraham binding his son on the top of Moriah, and raising the knife over him. But then, at the very last moment God speaks again: *'Abraham, do not lay your hand on the boy...now I know that you fear God.'* And the Lord provides a ram to sacrifice instead of Isaac. And Abraham names the place Yahweh Yireh, *the Lord will provide.*

And this my friends, is the ultimate secret of faith. The assurance that the Lord will provide. Whether in life or in death, somehow, someday, God will be there for us. And His grace will be sufficient.

And I have certainly found this to be true at St. Michael's. In all of the moments of challenge and crisis, the Lord has always provided. And often it's been through you, the body of Christ. When we first arrived you loved us and made us feel like family. When we had crisis pregnancies, you gathered around us and prayed for protection and mountains were moved. When there was a house fire, you literally welcomed us into your homes for months at a time. Truly God has provided.

But still, you and I are left with a major question. How did *Abraham* find this faith, that God would provide? Where did it come from? And how can I find this faith too. Certainly we can't muster it on our own. We can't generate faith by aesthetic or ethical living. How did Abraham find the faith to overcome His fear?

Well, we don't know for sure. But there's an intriguing verse in the NT that may give us a clue. In the gospel of John chapter 8 Jesus says these intriguing words: '*Abraham rejoiced to see my day. He saw it and was glad.*'

Yes, could it be that somewhere on Moriah. God gave Abraham a vision of another Son, walking up a mountain, bearing wood on his back. Could it be that God gave Abraham a glimpse of Jesus on Calvary? It's striking that the ancient rabbis before Christ, wrote of Isaac. '*He is like one who carries his own cross on his shoulder.*'

We don't know exactly what Abraham saw that led him to rejoice. But we do know what can lead *us* to rejoice and to live with unconquerable faith. Simply, that 2,000 years after Abraham, Jesus walked in his footsteps. Through the valley of the shadow of death and up the mountain of Moriah—that would one day be renamed, Jerusalem. And like Isaac, he bears the wood and willingly offers up his life. Only this time there will be no answer from the Lord. Simply a cry in the darkness. '*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.*'

And he did this for you and he did this for me. You see, Jesus is the true lamb God provided on the mountain, to take our place, and to bear the sins of the world.

And so the reason we can courageously TAKE and GO and OFFER. Is because God has already done this for us. As Jesus says in John 10, '*No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.*' And as Paul writes in Romans 8, '*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?*'

And it's when we contemplate, and savor, and rejoice in this great thing God as done for us, that at last faith is ignited in our souls. For we know that

whatever happens in life or in death, God will graciously give us all things. And thus we can follow him with courage, because quite simply, we have nothing to lose. As Jim Elliot observed, *'He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose.'*

I close with a letter of faith written by a woman named Karen Watson. Karen was a missionary to Iraq and was murdered in 2004. She was 38 and had been a Christian for 8 years. But before she died she wrote a letter to her pastors in the U.S. This is what she said:

Dear Pastor Phil and Pastor Roger,

You should only be opening this letter in the event of my death. When God calls, there are no regrets...I wasn't called to a place. I was called to Him. To obey was my objective; to suffer was expected. His glory was my reward. His glory *is* my reward...The missionary heart cares more than some think wise, risks more than some think safe, dreams more than some think practical, expects more than some think possible. I was called not to comfort or success but to obedience...There is no joy outside of knowing Jesus and serving Him.

My dear St. Michael's family. It has been an unbelievable privilege to serve Jesus with you these last ten years. By His grace may we follow our Savior's call. May we finish this race, fighting the good fight, keeping the faith, until we see Him face to face. For His sake and for His glory. Let's pray...