

January 18 & 19, 2025

A New Way | Here I Am

Genesis 22:1-14

Pastor Paul Dean

Homeowners!?!? It was February 2014 and my wife, and I were in a reality tv show called bath crashers. It's one of those shows where they remodel really ugly bathrooms. And there we were in season 9 of bath crashers bearing our old ugly bathroom to the world in exchange for a much nicer and newer one. And our only job for the days they were filming was to be ready and present at a moment's notice. The producers were not playing around. They had timetables and budgets to manage, and they were not going to wait around for some delinquent homeowners.

Homeowners!?!? Being fully present and ready to go my wife and I would respond... "Here we are". We are here and ready to go for whatever they needed for that part of the project.
Homeowners!?!?

In our scripture today we are going to take a look at another project. A much more important project. A project that will change the world. A project that is so profound that it is still going on and changing the world today. And God, the one who envisions this project needs leaders for this project. God needs deeply committed volunteers for this project to be successful. And we see that at the beginning of the project God seeking the commitment of one particular family, Abraham and Sarah's family. But this story is very, very hard to read and to place into context.

Remember – we are not reading a story from a western modern experience with all of the benefits of 3000 or so years of human moral evolution. We are reading a pre-modern eastern story that if left in its context makes rational sense. But it is still hard to read. It's the text of Abraham and Isaac.

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ² He said, "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 that I shall show you." (Gen 22:1-2 NRS)

Now, over the centuries there have been many, many interpretations of this text. And those interpretations lead us to think in a couple of different ways.

One is, how terrible is God? What kind of God would command someone to do this? Child sacrifice? Heinous. How can we worship this kind of a God? Would God ever ask me to do this? God is breaking all kinds of moral and ethical rules. I could never follow this God.

Or... there are those among us who this text is a test of their own faith. They ask the impossible question, *"If God would ask me to do this or something just as hard, would I have the faith to carry it out?"*

And what about Abraham? What is his deal? Is this blind faithfulness that he will carry this thing out? What was he thinking?

Or we may point to the original promise given to Abraham that Abraham would have more descendants that stars in the sky so Abraham knew that if God would kill Isaac, God's promise of countless descendants would not come true and so Abraham knew full well that God, somehow, would swoop in to save the day.

Or... we just hide this text... don't talk about it... write it off as fiction or an anomaly.

Or we can unpack this text in what might be a new way for us but not a new way for the earliest of scholars and rabbis who studied this text. You see... sometimes in our Christian imagination we can get a bit off track.

To start we are going to start with worship in the time of Abraham. To show a god, any god, how loyal or faithful you are you would worship that God through sacrifice, burnt offerings of grain or animals. It is totally weird to us today but completely normal and expected in Abraham's time. And child sacrifice was one of those practices.

Heinous to us and we will see, extremely difficult for Abraham but not outside the realm of what is possible.

So, God tells Abraham to show his faithfulness through offering. But not any offering, a burnt offering which is an offering that symbolizes the complete and total submission to God. The burnt offering is an unblemished, perfect offering. The offering is completely consumed symbolizing complete devotion and surrender. This is what Abraham is asked to do. Complete surrender.

But Abraham does something interesting. God tells him to go to Moriah with Isaac where the sacrifice was to take place. It would be half a day walk but it takes them 3 days. And Abraham brings some other young men with him. Is Abraham procrastinating? Is Abraham hoping that God will change God's mind. Or is Abraham, balancing being a father and a faithful servant by trying to give Isaac more time and brings some of Isaac's friends along to keep Isaac company? Abraham is faithful, but something is getting in the way.

However, Abraham is acting quite consistent. Remember when God asks Abraham to prepare the blood path earlier in Genesis, Abraham does but then Abraham procrastinates – paralyzed by fear, God then does for Abraham what Abraham could not do for himself, God walks the blood path on Abraham's behalf.

So, this is a pattern for Abraham, faithfulness, but some hesitation. And why not? Completely human thing to do. And just like in the story of Hagar last week the promise hangs in the balance. And we don't hear that Abraham was weeping out loud like Hagar, but Abraham's hesitation is evidence enough that he is really struggling. (unpack a lot more in the podcast)

¹⁰ Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ¹² He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you

have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." ¹³ And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. (Gen 22:10-13 NRS)

God brings Abraham back in focus and again reminds Abraham of the promise God made and just like with Hagar last week, Abraham's eyes are opened, hope is restored, and he sees the ram in the thicket, that has been there the whole time just like the well was for Hagar. God keeps the promise. But God does something else. In a wider culture where child sacrifice was present in religious practice God loudly and clearly demonstrates that child sacrifice will not be a part of this project.

But there is something right at the beginning of this story that is missed on us English readers. We read this whole episode as a command. God says to Abraham – take Isaac as a command. As if Abraham had no choice. But that's not what the Hebrew says. The Hebrew tells us that it is more of a request. It's more along the lines of please take... or take I pray... one rabbi translates this as phrase as God saying to Abraham "I beg of you Abraham."

And if you read this not as a command but if you read this as a request it changes the whole dynamic. God is asking Abraham to volunteer. It's not "Homeowner's" It's not a command. It's request... please, or I pray that you would do this...

And what is God's mission... what is God's goal? What is God working toward? The restoration of all things. The healing and wholeness of all things. The redemption of all things. To bless the world and the promise of knowing the one true God, that the world would come to know this God, and in knowing God the world will be blessed... but in order to do that God has to have a partner... a willing and faithful partner.

And this project is going to be hard; it's going to take generations, and it is pretty much an open-ended project... one that is still going on today. This word of hope, and love that God has promised, this word needs volunteers. This project is going to

need volunteers, and God is not too proud to ask...
not too proud to pray... or to say, please...

That's one of the reasons why God spends so much time peeling back the layers of Abraham in the request.

Take, I pray, your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac... again here our English translations fail us. The syntax of this text implies dialogue. Another rabbi puts it this way...

Abraham said to God, "I have two sons". "God answered him, "Your only son". Abraham said, "This one is the only son of his mother and the other is the only son of his mother". God then said, "the one whom you love". Abraham replied, "I love both of them". Where upon God said, "even Isaac".

God peels back layer after layer... making very clear to Abraham just what he is actually volunteering to do. Because none of this works... the promise... the blessing... none of it works without Abraham being willing, freely making a choice. God knows that if Abraham is commanded, Abraham's choice would be made out of obligation, not willing faithfulness.

God does not want obligation. God wants willing faithfulness. This is not a "homeowners" command. God does not want a relationship based out of a loveless "If I have too." God wants a relationship based out of a full-throated love, "Here I Am".