

Sermon: Abraham, Isaac and the Test

A dramatic reading of, "My Feet Rarely Stand Idle..." by Chad Bird. Modern Reformation: vol. 25 #1, Jan/Feb 2016, p. 24-29

My feet rarely stand idle when God is around. He's always telling me to go.

IT'S BEEN THAT WAY from the beginning, when he spoke to me in Ur: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." I remember hearing those first words as if there were a pregnant pause between each phrase.

"Go ... " And I said, "Yes, I will travel to another part of my country."

"From your country ... "

And I thought, "Okay, God, but I will take my kindred with me."

"And your kindred ... "

And I thought, "Well, at least I will take my father's house."

"And your father's house ... "

He had whittled away at those places and people who had theretofore defined my existence. A landless, kinless, fatherless life awaited me. Yet still he wasn't finished. This Yahweh, this God in whom I had come to believe as an adult-so unlike the swarm of idols around which I was reared was a strange, backwards deity. He would have me throw caution to the wind, uproot myself, and trail off to who knows where with only His word in my pocket.

Yet, despite the seeming lunacy of the command, I went. When I was called, I obeyed and went to a place that I was to receive as an inheritance, not knowing where I was going. I sojourned in a land of promise, no roots, no rights. All I had was the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. That was sufficient. It seems ages ago. In some ways it is. I was seventy-five when I, along with my wife Sarah and our nephew Lot, set foot on Canaan's soil. Back then, I thought I was an old man.

Here I am now, with well over a century of years under my belt. We've had our ups and downs.

- The debacle in Egypt when, as a direct result of my self-protective lying, my wife was whisked away to Pharaoh's harem.
- The strife between my men and Lot's men that led to a further split in our family.
- My defeat of Chedorlaomer and his armies when they kidnapped my nephew Lot
- The foolish choice Sarah and I made to go to Plan B and have a son through our maidservant, Hagar.
- That morning when I looked down upon the smoldering ruins of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah which I had pleaded with God to spare.
- My stupid, second lie about Sarah being my sister that got us embroiled in yet another royal mess.

Finally, when my own body was as good as dead, and Sarah's womb was as barren as the desert sand, we experienced the miraculous birth of our long-awaited son of promise. So hilariously inconceivable was his conception that we named him Isaac, which means laughter.

But the laughter that once was like joy rising from the grave became entombed in the ancient soil of my soul once more. For the Lord who 'would not let my feet stand idle, who called me out of my country, my kindred and my father's house, told me to go yet again. But this was a different journey—a journey to a wordless land, a region beyond the reach of speech, for it defied description. The Lord called me to do what he had never required of a man: to give back to him the gift I had waited for my whole life.

I heard his words as, decades ago, I had heard the words that called me out of Ur of the Chaldees. Then, as now, each syllable, snail-like, crawled along and in my mind, I engaged in dialogue with the Lord.

"Abraham!" He said. "Here am I."

"Take your son ... " And I thought to myself, "But I have two sons. I have Ishmael and I have Isaac—"

"Your only son ... " And I said to myself, "But Ishmael is the only son of Hagar, and Isaac is the only son of Sarah—"

"Whom you love ... " And I thought, "But I love both my sons—" "Isaac."

Finally, the circle narrowed to its epicenter as he pronounced the name of my son of laughter. There caught in my throat a dread unlike anything I had ever felt before.

I shivered as He spoke his next words, He told me to go to the land of Moriah. He told me He'd show me a mountain there. He told me to offer Isaac there as a burnt offering.

When a man worships a strange, backwards God, he does strange, backwards things that he himself cannot begin to understand. There I was, hearing God tell me to kill the very son He had promised me, and I put up no protest.

I, who had interceded for Sodom, did not intercede for my own son.

I, who had gone so far as to lie to Pharaoh and Abimelech to save my own skin, uttered nothing to save my own flesh and blood.

Oh the things I could have said: "Far be it from You to do such a thing, Lord, to ask me to put to death my righteous son! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?"

I could have said, "Lord, you promised that one from my own body would be my heir, You delivered on that promise when Isaac was born, and you swore that from my loins would come descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sands of the seashore. Those promises are null and void if the stars wink maliciously down upon the bloody corpse of my son, if his body becomes only so much sand on the shore of my sea of tears."

I could have said, "Show pity, dear Lord, upon my aged wife, Sarah, who will die of a broken heart if I return home without her only son. Show pity, dear Lord, upon me, for I fear that I too shall go to Sheol in mourning for my son."

Oh the arguments I could have employed, the soaring rhetoric I could have displayed, the weeping and wailing and pleading in which I could have engaged. Yet I did not. And why I did not I cannot fully explain. All I can say is this: what I could not do by my own reason or strength, I did when the Lord spoke these words to me.

As when the Lord called me out of Ur, I obeyed and went, not knowing where I was going; so now I obeyed and went, not knowing what the Lord had in store for me and my son. All I knew was that the Lord cannot lie and if He promised to make my offspring like the dust of the earth, He would do it, even if that meant raising my son from the dust to life again.

So I arose early in the morning, not even delaying the start of the journey. I saddled my donkey, not waiting for my servant to do it. I cut the wood we would need for the burnt offering, lest we be unprepared on the mountain. I took two of my young men with me, so that no lack of help might hinder our pilgrimage. And yes, I took my son, my only son whom I love, Isaac.

As we arose and went to the place of which God had told me, I had time to ruminate upon what was to come. Moriah is not right around the corner; it's a three-day journey.

Along the way, we were joined by an unseen traveler, one who wears many disguises. He walked alongside me by day, having donned the mask of fear and whispered into my ear, "You pitiful fool! You'll die an old bag of bones with the innocent blood of your murdered son tattooed onto your wrinkled skin, his screams haunting your dreams, and your wife's accusing face a reflection of your own guilty soul,"

He lay down beside me at night, having donned now the mask of reason, and whispered to me, "My dear friend, I beseech you to reconsider this irrational demand from a deity who is patently insane. For your sake, for the sake of your son and wife, turn around and go back home. Wash your hands of this bloodthirsty tyrant."

He had even more masks: shame, doubt, guilt-you name it. I did not argue with him. To mute his words, I repeated the words my God told me, "I will establish my covenant with Isaac as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." His words are what kept my hesitant feet moving forward, my heavy heart beating with faith, my weary eyes locked on the promise that could not fail. On the third day, I lifted up my eyes and saw the place from a distance. Here was the land of Moriah, and here was the mountain God had chosen. I knew the place well. Years before, Melchizedek, the priest and king of Salem, had met me near here when I returned from rescuing my nephew Lot from the kings who had kidnapped him. On that day, he refreshed my weary body with bread and wine; he blessed me and I gave him a tenth of the spoil.

Yet this time I, not Melchizedek, was to serve as the priest. I was not here to offer a tenth of wartime spoils to God's representative, but to offer up the whole of my son upon

the altar of God. There was no one to bring me bread and wine; tears were my food and drink. Here at Moriah, near Salem, which some call Jerusalem, we had reached our journey's end. Here in Jerusalem, my son, the one in whom the blessings of God resided, would shed his blood.

I told the two young men who had traveled with us, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you." I suppose some will think I was pulling the wool over their eyes. Yes, he and I would go over there, he and I would worship, but only I would come again, right? How could it be otherwise, for this "worship" necessitates the death of the promised son? How could my son return with me when his body would be ashes upon an altar?

I will tell you how. The God in whom I believe is the God of Adam, the God of Seth, the God of Noah. He is not the God of the dead but of the living. If He crafted Adam from the dust of the earth; if He brought Noah through the liquid grave of earth-covering waters; if, indeed, He created life inside the dead womb of my wife, Sarah, then surely he was able to recreate Isaac from the ashes of the altar. He will resurrect, reform, and re-breathe life into my son.

My God is able even to raise the dead. It must be, for God has told me two seemingly contradictory things: first, that through Isaac my offspring will be named and second, that I am to sacrifice this same offspring. He is the Lord of truth, He cannot lie. I will sacrifice my son, but God will raise him up again. We will go to the mountain, we will worship-and, yes, we shall both return.

So I took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac my son and I took in my hand the fire and the knife. We went, both of us together, father and son, up the mountain. My son shouldered the weight of the wood upon which he was to be sacrificed. I carried the knife that was to spill his blood and the fire that would consume my son, this lamb, this God- promised seed.

I glanced over at him as we walked alongside each other. My mind replayed over and over again the good news I had heard passed down from the fathers. Long ago, at the advent of evil in this world, the Lord had promised to send the woman's seed to crush the head of the evil serpent and, in that same action, to suffer the venom of death from the fangs of that serpent. He would shoulder the evil of the world and crush the skull of the one who had introduced death into our world. So when my son questioned me as we walked, the Spirit of Yahweh gave me the words to say,

"My father!"

"Here am I, my son."

"Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

The answer I gave him is the answer the Lord gave to me, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son."

That's what He had been doing for his children all along...

- God provided the animals that He himself sacrificed to make skins by which to cover the shame of Adam and Eve.

- He provided the flock from which Abel, by faith, offered up sacrifices that were pleasing to the Lord and today, on the mountain, the Lord would provide once more.

Yet my words cast their vision beyond the horizons of this day. For as Isaac carried that wood of sacrifice, as the Spirit opened my eyes to foresee in him the promised Seed of the woman, I believed that God would provide that lamb for the burnt offering.

It would not be an animal from Eden; it would not be from the flock of Abel; it would not be a beast, upon the altar slain--- but the seed, the son of the woman, whom God would provide in the fullness of time.

When we came to the place of which God had told me, I built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac, my son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Here was my son, my only son whom I loved, Isaac, led like a lamb to the slaughter, who did not open his mouth. Here was the seed, the son whom God had promised to me. A thousand voices beckoned me to unbind him and walk away. But the voice of Yahweh alone is the voice that always speaks truth and that voice had said, "Offer him there as a burnt offering." So I reached out my hand and took the knife to slaughter my son.

Were I to live a hundred lifetimes more, I would never forget the moment when I lifted the blade, when my hand hung suspended between heaven and earth, life and death, over the bound body of my son and the Angel of the Lord seized my wrist with words of grace.

"Abraham, Abraham!" he called from heaven.

"Here am I."

"Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."

There are no words recorded of my response to this angel, for human speech has not yet – nor will it ever -- create words that capture what resurrection feels like.

- It is like being catapulted from the tomb to a throne in the twinkling of an eye.
- It is like having the blindfold removed at your execution to discover you've been led into a party.
- It is like many things, yet like none of them; for the resurrection from grief to hope, from death to life, is a gift that experience alone has the tongue to tell.

I have tasted that experience. My son, my only son whom I love. Laughter -- he was spared to usher joy into his old father's life yet another day.

I lifted up my eyes and, behold, behind me was a ram caught in a thicket by his horns. So I took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of my son. I had told Isaac, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." And he had. So I called the name of that place, "The LORD will provide," as they say to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided."

But not on that day alone would the Lord provide. For the Angel of the Lord called to me a second time from heaven and said,

"By myself, I have sworn, declares the LORD, 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 seed as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice."

As the ram lay burning upon the altar, I heard these words of the angel: "In your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed." In my seed -- not seeds, but seed -- the blessing of the Lord would extend to the whole world. From me, from my bloodline, would come the seed promised to Adam and Eve.

In him, the Lord would finally provide what all people needed: righteousness, forgiveness, life, and salvation. The lying serpent would strike his heel. He would drink in the venom of death. Yet by his death he shall destroy the power of death once for all.

I lifted up my eyes to look around at the mountain called Moriah.

I surveyed Jerusalem.

I gazed down at the sacrifice upon the altar, whose blood was shed instead of my son's.

I glanced up to where the Angel of the Lord had spoken to me from heaven, and I thought, "On the mount of the Lord, on this mountain, it shall be provided."

The Lord will provide the seed as the sacrifice appointed.

- He will be the Son who is not spared but delivered up for us all.
- He will be the ram caught in the thicket offered up as a sacrifice for me and Isaac and all others.
- On the mountain of the Lord, the Lord will provide his seed, his Son, his only Son, whom he loves.

I rejoiced to see that day. I saw it and was glad.

Let's pray together....