

Letting Go My Isaacs Genesis 22: 1-18

Out of the dim mists of antiquity, a story comes down to us. The ancient story of Abraham and Isaac and the bloodthirsty God who demands child sacrifice.... This is a puzzling and troubling story, especially for those of us who prefer a gentle Jesus, the loving savior, to the Old Testament's demanding and angry God.

Child sacrifice was common in the culture of Abraham's time. Such a demand was not out of character for a god who also insisted on holy war, the complete extermination of a vanquished enemy. This story is consistent with the reality of those listening with the ears of 4000 years ago.

God's demand for child sacrifice was not unusual or unreasonable. Also reasonable was Abraham's obedience. This story tells us a lot about the way people think. It reflects what people understood about who God was and about the relationship between God and people. Let's listen for what it tells us about our relationship with God and about our own Isaacs.

"And Everyone Has His Own Isaac"

I want Abram for my friend, said God.

I would make him a people great,

More than the sea-sands,

A people and a new land and a blessing.

I will give him Isaac, said God.

And Abraham, looking, loved back.

I will build altars in the land you gave me, friend,

An altar at Sichem,

an altar at Valley of Clear Seeing, Move on.

An altar east of Bethel, west of Hai.

So Abram built the altars.

And Abram moved his tent by Mamre

at Hebron built an altar to the Lord.

Then God took Abram out of doors,

My childless friend, said God,

look up at the countless stars.

And God said, Abram, I am going to pluck a son from you,
a son to give you sons.

You'll have more sons than stars, said God,
before we're through.

So Abram put his faith in God and it was reckoned virtue.

But God left Abram waiting,

God gave him time, time almost to count the stars.

But one day God called Abram,

remembering the stars, and said,
Abram, you shall have a new name.
And God called him "Father of many Nations."
God, taunting, called him Abraham.

And friends have covenants, said God,
And we will have one, too, He said.
I am your God and you are my own Abraham.
The sign is in your flesh.

Later God thought:

I cannot have him counting stars forever.

Already, Sara laughs at me.

It is time. It is time I gave him Isaac, said God.

And Abraham became the father of a son, Isaac.

A hundred years of unspent fatherhood

he poured all out on Isaac.

And laughing Sara's breasts grew warm and full. Themselves they gave to Isaac.

There was no more counting stars for God's poor friend.

He had the seed for all the flowers of the earth.

God had given Abraham his Isaac.

And God watched Abraham with love,

watched him as he played with sheep and land.

And later on, he spoke:

I am the pack-rat God, said God.

And now, Abraham, I want Isaac.

But we are friends and you gave Isaac, Abr'am said,

I know we are, said God. But I want Isaac.

Till Abr'am cried,

The stars so countless and the many sands

and would you take my one son Isaac?

And God would only answer back: I want Isaac.

And Abraham, because he was a friend of God's said,

God, take Isaac. (from *Discovering the Depths* by Dr. Bill Clemmons)

Dr. Bill Clemmons has written, "You will never find the depths of availability open to you until you make some conscious effort to deliver yourself up in 'holy abandonment' to God's activity in, through, and around you." (*Discovering the Depths*) What does it mean to abandon yourself to God's activity in your life? To let go your own "Isaac" requires more than we dare think. Perhaps, the following conversation will help explain.

(knock knock)

Jack: Coming, coming. Who's there? (opening door) God? Is that you? You've come for a visit? How nice!?!
 God: Yes, I've come to see you, ...to get to know you better.
 J: Well, please come in. Come on into the living room. Have a seat. Can I get you something to drink?
 G: No. No, thank-you. I'm fine. So this is your living room?
 J: Oh, yes. It's where I always bring my guests.
 G: It's very attractive.
 J: Yes, thank you. It's really the nicest room in the house. Helps me make a good impression on people. Just between You and me, God, I'm always happier if visitors never go anywhere else in the house. Upstairs is a mess and the basement!... Well, you know how basements can be.
 G: Since I came to get to know you better, would you be willing to show me around the house, kind of a tour?
 J: (hesitates) Oh ... sure! I mean, who can say "No" to you? Over there's the dining room and that's the kitchen.
 G: What's through that door?
 J: Oh, nothing. Nothing! Wanna see the back yard?
 G: Whatever you want to show me.
 J: Tell you what. Let's go upstairs and you can, ...No, wait, the bed's not made up.
 G: That's okay. I don't mind.
 J: Are you sure I can't fix you some lunch?
 G: Let's go see what's upstairs.
 J: Well, I guess so, but it's really not fit to be seen.
 G: Anything that's yours is okay, including the basement. In fact, that's where I...
 J: Don't go down there! Why can't you just stay in the living room where you belong?!?
 G: (pause) What's the matter, Jack?
 J: I'm sorry. I'm just a little irritated. I mean, if you don't mind my saying it, you're being a little pushy, God. First, you come by without calling first. Then, you won't stay put where I want you to. You keep wanting to go see upstairs and the basement, when I told you it's really a mess! I mean, it's embarrassing...
 G: Jack, it's okay. You never need to be embarrassed by me.
 J: I'm not embarrassed by you. I mean, I'm embarrassed by me. I mean..., listen, God, I get embarrassed when the termite inspector goes down into the basement. It's the place where all the clutter goes.
 G: It's okay. But, Jack, you need to know something.
 J: What's that?
 G: The basement....
 J: Yes?
 G: That's why I came herein the first place.
 J: What do you mean?

- G: Your basement is the whole reason I came to your house. If you won't let me go there, I might as well just go.
- J: No, wait. God. Okay. Anywhere you want to go. Anywhere in the house is okay.
- G: Even the basement?
- J: It's right this way.

There is some place in just about everyone's house where company doesn't get to go, probably not even close friends, some place cluttered or filthy, whatever the reason. If someone outside the household sees that space, you'll be revealed. They'll know the ugly truth about you, that you're not as together as you like to project – that life is more like the basement than the living room. Everyone has an Isaac. What is yours?

Abraham's Isaac was more than the beloved son of his old age. It was more than the fulfillment of a lifelong promise. Abraham's Isaac was the validation of his life choice to leave the world he knew, his friends and family, and travel to an unknown place, a Promised Land.

God was leading him and Isaac was the sign Abraham had chosen well. He had followed the best path, the countless challenges of his journey. Abraham must have questioned his choice 100 times. The Bible says Abraham trusted God and faith was his salvation. Isaac was the proof. Abraham stepped out by faith when he left home. Again, in this story, he acts by faith.

How often must we step out in faith? What does this mean for you? What does this mean for this church?

And everyone has an Isaac. What is your Isaac? –the most important priority of your life. How can you discover your Isaac? You can ask yourself--

- Isaac was most precious to Abraham. What is most precious to you?
- What is the one "identity piece" I will keep even if I let go of everything else?
- Where do I sense God's activity in my life that really challenges me?
- What challenging task have I accomplish that now validates my existence?
- What do I worry about at night when I close my eyes?
- Where am I controlling and anxious?
- What might happen in my life if I really turned loose?
- What would it mean for you to offer it completely to God?

What about this congregation?*

- What is our Isaac?
- What as a congregation do we value most?
- What do we do that we hold to ourselves?
 - Our style of worship?
 - Our close feeling of community?
 - Our new building?
- What will it mean for us to offer it completely to God?

It's not the answers we articulate that matter most, but what we do, the answers we live. This congregation has stepped out in faith in its very conception and birth, and again in the shaping of your life together and your governance. You acted in great faith when you called me to be your pastor and in the capital campaign. Each time, leadership has emerged. People have stepped up.

Being Christian and being church mean stepping out in faith over and over again. The closer walk we desire with God means walking more and more on God's path, more and more on God's turf. It means walking more and more on the ground made holy by Jesus.

Three times in the story, Abraham was called – first by God, then by Isaac, and finally, by an angel of God. Each time, he responded, "Here I am." I stand in readiness. Let us respond to God's continuing call to be church according to the gifts we possess. Let us answer, "We, too, stand in readiness, O Spirit. Here we are."