

July 2, 2017

TEXT: Genesis 22:1–14

TITLE: Walking On Together

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

The story of Abraham almost sacrificing Isaac is a lot of things, but here is what it is not. It is not an easy story, a simplistic story, or an irrelevant story from long ago. It is not an example of how God is a God of violence and death. And it is not a convenient excuse for why people shouldn't go to church or believe in God anymore. We've all heard people say that the church is dying, that churchgoers are hypocritical, and Christianity is the source of bad things like violence and homophobia and the Crusades. My reply is that the world is dying, hypocrisy is universal, and at its heart religion is a sincere effort to confront violence and prejudice and wars, if you're brave enough to argue with God about life's tough questions. So don't let someone cop out and try to use this story of Abraham and Isaac from Genesis 22 as the reason for why they're unwilling to get out of bed on Sunday mornings and do the hard work of pursuing a living, vibrant faith.

Now, here's what the story of Abraham and Isaac is. It is part of the mosaic of faith, one story out of lots of stories in our scripture. It is also a story from our beginnings, when the Bible moved from creation myths to living history—talking about real people, in real time with real struggles about how to live each day in a harsh yet wonderful world. It's a story culminating a bunch of stories about a human being named Abraham who heard God's call, talked with God, bargained and laughed and worshiped God, back in a time when all the rules for life were being rewritten. This is before Moses, before the Ten Commandments and the law from Mt. Sinai. This is a story about God and human beings establishing something new—a covenant—a deep trust connecting heaven and earth that helps make sense of this life for all of us even today.

This is also a story of new understandings. Abraham had to learn that although folks around him worshiped idols and lots of gods, there was only one God. Abraham had to learn that although his body and Sarah's body were old and withered, new life could spring from them—like a son they would name Isaac. And Abraham had to learn that although everyone else seemed to believe that killing children was the best way to get God's attention, they were wrong. Sure, God could have sent Abraham a memo: "*Dear Sir, please tell everyone to stop sacrificing their children.*" But memos get lost and are forgotten. So long ago a teaching parable was lived out, which became a story and scripture for us—this hard, complex, rich story of Genesis 22. And why? Because only in that way would we remember it.

This story occurs near the beginning of the bible. But the light from this story shines through all the pages that follow it. According to some ancient rabbis, the mountain in the land of Moriah upon which Abraham would prepare to sacrifice his son is the same mountain upon which David would establish the temple of Jerusalem 1000 years later. And when Abraham's son, his only son, Isaac, carried the wood to this heart-rending sacrifice, remember that God's son, Jesus, would carry a wooden cross 2000 years

later. And the punch-line of this story is that God provides for us—sending a ram to take the place of Isaac then, sending the Lamb of God to take our place even now.

Some people think that the Christian faith is supposed to be straight-forward, without any rough edges or contradictions. Yet faith has to be big enough to contain fancy church sanctuaries and hospital intensive care units. It has to be big enough to embrace babies held for baptism blessings and babies comforted after leukemia treatments. It has to be big enough for all of life and all of death and whatever comes after both life and death. This story is a good place to start if you can handle a faith that big.

Of all the details in Genesis 22, this week I was struck by a simple phrase repeated in verses 6 and 8. After describing how Abraham agreed to fulfill God's request, we're told that he and Isaac traveled alone to the sacrifice spot, carrying the wood, fire and knife that would be needed. The end of vs. 6 notes how "the two of them walked on together." Then, after Isaac looks around and wonders where the sacrificial lamb is and Abraham enigmatically answers that God will provide, again we read the same phrase "The two of them walked on together."

Walked on together. Three words of faith for us today. "Walk"—on this day and every day, we are to walk, move, get out of bed and get going. So long as we are physically able, we are to walk. Abraham on that day was walking carrying fire and a knife. Knowing how they were intended to be used on his own son, they had to be a heavy burden. Everyone—everyone you meet—is carrying some sort of burden. Everyone here today has some scar, some pain, some struggle they carry with them wherever they go. It can be a lot of things—the loss of a loved one, a physical ailment, a financial worry, a relationship uncertainty. It can be an old scar or a fresh wound. Now that is not all we carry. We also carry joys and excitement. We have good days and bad days. But despite our cheery Facebook posts or quick responses of "I'm fine" when asked how things are going, we need to remember that everyone carries burdens.

The bible never sugarcoats that fact. Think of the 23rd Psalm about walking in the valley of the shadow of death. Think of the people that Jesus met and the burdens they carried—the man born blind, the crippled man by the pool of Siloam, the woman with the dehumanizing flow of blood, the woman cast out by others who snuck in to wash Jesus' feet with her own tears. When Jesus got ready to preach to a huge crowd seated before him on a hillside, what was the first thing he said? He looked at them, saw their burdens and offered them beatitudes—blessings: *Blessed are you, the poor, the meek, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Yours is the kingdom of heaven.*

Let's be clear. There are no successful churches. There are only places to which people walk carrying their burdens and a small mustard seed of faith—places where we come together, praying, listening, checking in, working with and caring for one another without judgment or prejudice as best we can. ELPC is not a successful church. On our best days we are simply a church pointing to Christ's love and walking together with our mutual burdens toward life's horizon.

That leads to the second word of the phrase from Genesis: Walk on. Scripture says “we walk by faith, not by sight.” That was certainly true of Abraham’s difficult walk with his young son beside him. Faith was the only thing that kept him putting one foot in front of the other, since neither sight nor reason could make any sense out of this stark demand for a sacrifice. It is just as true of many of our walks. We don’t know what tomorrow may bring—good or bad, life or death—so we walk by faith—not guarantees, not magic spells of protection, not even sight.

Clare Booth Luce was an American writer and diplomat in the years after World War II. A hard story is told of how she was sitting at the bedside of a younger woman who was dying of cancer. The woman kept repeating over and over, “Why me? Why me?” Finally Clare said to her quietly, “But dear, why not you?”¹ Sometimes the only way to move on is to let go of things, such as the idea that we are exempt from mortality and life’s tragedies. White skin or wealth or nationality won’t protect us from the vagaries and frailty of life. As hard as it may be to hear, sometimes our “Why me?” questions need to be answered with the gentle reminder “Why not you?” Then we remember that each day is a gift—each breath is a miracle—each tear or smile or laughter is part of the wonder of life, of a God-given, God-blessed life. Either the horizon before us is one defined by our singular life or it is a horizon defined by God’s expansive, gracious, loving spirit. Only the latter horizon is something we can walk toward. Only the latter makes sense as a goal when we decide, like Abraham, to “walk on.”

Lastly, we are to walk on together. There are a lot of single people in the world – single as in unmarried, single as in widowed or living alone, single as in being introverts or kind of social loners. Singleness is not a deficit in the eyes of God. Despite the youth-married-connected mindset of the world, singleness is OK. But to fully be ourselves, as children of God and followers of Christ, we need to connect with others in some way. Sometimes that is through family. Sometimes that is through work or where we volunteer or our neighborhood or our church. If Abraham and Isaac’s story is one golden piece in a beautiful mosaic of faith, our life is one piece of a larger mosaic of life in God’s world. We are diminished individually if we do not connect with someone else. We are diminished as a community and as a country if we don’t care about others—about the burdens everyone is carrying—about the horizon and hopes toward which everyone is walking.

God’s call to “walk on together” always shows up in surprising ways. It may involve a baseball umpire crossing the Clemente bridge and saving a young woman about to commit suicide. It may involve speaking up at a public hearing to protect real health care for those in need, speaking up to protect the rights of every person residing on American soil, seeking by words and deeds to embody a spirit worthy of this one nation, under God, indivisible, committed to liberty and justice for all.

Like Abraham and Isaac, we walk on together. We are a part of this old, old story. Each day we too respond to whatever heaven places before us with the words, “Here I am,

¹ Quoted by Lance Morrow, Heart, p. 21.

Lord.” Each day we walk by faith, not sight. And with each step we take, we too say, “The Lord will provide. The Lord will provide.” Faith happens in life’s small moments—it happens in every step we take (When?) when we walk on together.