Genesis 21: 1-7, 22: 1-14
September 14, 2025
Ellen Crawford True

Tell the Whole Story

The past two weeks have brought some of my favorite sights and sounds of fall as our preschool, First Kids has gotten up and running for the year. I've watched parents and grandparents drop off and pick up their little ones realizing that eighteen years ago, I was the one dropping my then-four-year-old off at her new school in Chambersburg, PA. I can still remember putting on my game face as she climbed out of the car to greet her new teachers. I can still remember the deep breaths I took as I watched her walk into her new world without me. It is not always easy. A few First Kids have been known to cry a bit when they are handed off. And there are parents who shed a few tears, too. Our children are precious. So, I mean it when I thank First Kids parents for trusting us with their little ones.

With the voices of preschool students and the faces of their parents in my mind, I found myself reading this text from Genesis—and wanting to dodge it. I found myself agreeing with the one scholar who at first glance would prefer to edit this story out of scripture or at least avoid talking about it. But it's here **and** it plays an important role in the larger story, and so we press on, trusting that there's good news here, too.

We spent last Sunday reflecting on the wonder of God's creation of the universe and basking in the goodness of creation. While that goodness remains even now, it is all but overshadowed by the ways humanity falls and falls short. In the wake of one brother killing another and any other number of wrong turns, God wipes the slate clean with the flood and sets his holy hopes on Noah and his family. Noah finds his own ways to disappoint God, and eventually God scatters humanity after the Tower of Babel. And then we read that God chooses to begin again with Abraham. Abraham and his

wife Sarah are central to the unfolding story of God and God's people. In chapter 12 of Genesis, God calls Abraham to take his family and go to a land that God will show him:

> The Lord said to Abram, 'Leave your land, your family, and your father's household for the land that I will show you. **2** I will make of you a great nation and will bless you. I will make your name respected, and you will be a blessing.'[1]

And Abraham (or Abram as he is known at that point) goes, no questions asked. Abraham's story continues with many twists and turns, including the long-awaited birth of Isaac. [Read Genesis 21:1-7, CEB]

Abraham and Sarah are well beyond the Tahoe or Suburban years when Isaac is born. His name means laughter, recalling Sarah's response when God promised her a son and highlighting her delight when the promise is fulfilled. With this laughter still ringing in our ears, we are met with the second part of this morning's text [Read Genesis 22:1-14, CEB].

This story mirrors almost exactly God's call to Abraham in chapter 12. When told to go, he goes. Here he packs up and travels once again to an unfamiliar place, with the task laid out before him, a task no one can imagine. One possible purpose of this narrative is to reveal that this God, our God is different from the other gods worshiped in Abraham's world. Horrific and awful as it is to acknowledge, child sacrifice was not unusual at the time. Some scholars have come to understand this text as a polemic, a critique of other religions in ancient times. Some argue that Abraham does not question the test because it would not be unusual for other gods or other religions to demand such a horrific sacrifice. God eventually shows Abraham a different way, but it takes a bit to get there.

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[1] Genesis 12: 1-2, Common English Bible

Even if we're able to accept this premise, it's not an easy story. Perhaps the most heart-wrenching moment comes when Isaac asks where the lamb is. Abraham responds, "God will see to it, my son."[2] Combined with Abraham's earlier words to the young men who travel with him and Isaac, stating that "The boy and I will walk up there, worship, and then come back to you," a possible picture begins to form. We begin to see a man who trusts or does his best to trust that this God who has brought him this far, this God who has made good on the promise before can still be trusted to bring life out of a path that seems to lead only toward one horrible dead end. Abraham has been held up as a model of obedience, in no small part because of this text, but one scholar, Ellen Davis argues that Abraham's actions here are more about faith than obedience: "Abraham trusts God totally with the life of the child they share, the life that God has given."[3]

The life of the child they share… We don't often think of sharing our children or grandchildren. They are *ours* to raise and nurture, *ours* to encourage and discipline. And yet, we have gathered around this font today and claimed something very different. This morning we have made promises to Miles and to his parents. We have vowed to share in the nurturing of this child and his family. We have acknowledged him as one of us, a fellow child of God entrusted to us to be shaped along with us as a blessing to the nations. He shares in the promise, and it's our job to help him understand what that means. "In life and in death we belong to God," we claim.[4] We are not our own, we often say. We are reminded that we are all children of the promise, just as Isaac was. The promise does not end with Isaac, nor by the grace of God does it end with us. God provides; God will provide. As people of faith, we make that claim everyday with one another and for one another. And we make that claim through the stories we choose to tell.

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[2] Genesis 22: 7, CEB
[3] http://www.faithandleadership.com/sermons/ellen-f-davis-radical-trust
[4] From "A Brief Statement of Faith," *Book of Confessions.*

After a week like this past one, it is good to begin this week with a baptism. It's good to see a baby wriggle as the cold water is placed on his head, to hear him cry, to see him take it all in. And it is good for other reasons, too. Simply put, it is good to be reminded of the promise. Through Abraham, God promises to shape a people to be a great nation, to be a blessing, and God does not let go of that promise—even when all the evidence seems to point to the contrary. Promise is an important part of the baptismal story as well. In the words we sing and say and pray around this font, we are reminded of the promise God makes to us and through us. The parents make promises, as do we. We promise to nurture Miles's faith and that of his family. One way we nurture that faith is by sharing stories of faith.

Numerous pastors spoke this past week about how they had not preached on this text before. Some of you understandably questioned why on earth the lectionary would include this story. I have only preached it once before, and the second time around is no easier. It's not a story that makes many Top 10 lists of favorite Bible stories, but it was clearly a story that mattered to the ancient Israelites. They understood this story to be a crucial one to remember and to share. Like last week's text, this morning's story was written down long after it had been told around countless campfires by a community in Exile following the destruction of Jerusalem and the near decimation of ancient Israel. In other words it was a story told in the midst of a life-doesn't-make-sense kind of world. Davis points out that:

> [T]his harrowing story exists to help people *who already believe* make sense of their most difficult experience, when God seems to take back everything they have ever received at God's

hand. In other words…the point is…to help people who are already in stay in—stay in relationship with the one true God, even when their world turns upside down.[5]

That just may be one role of this story and other stories like it, to share a deep and abiding sense of what it means to live an authentic life of faith in the midst of a world-gone-mad. When assassins strike down leaders across the political spectrum, when wildfires rage, when children go hungry, when floodwaters surge, when admired leaders let us down, when students barricade themselves in closets to avoid gunfire, we might be tempted to swaddle our children and grandchildren and ourselves in fairytales with happy endings and immerse everyone we love in Disney movies where everything works out just as we think it should. But when we're honest, you and I know that fairytales do not and cannot sustain us or them because they do not reflect the true life of faith. And blessedly, scripture is richer and truer than any fairytale. The stories that sustain us in those upside-down moments, those frightening moments, those depth-of-despair moments, those harrowing moments are not written by Disney or Pixar. No, the stories that sustain us are those handed down by the ones who came before us, the ones who were convinced or almost convinced that the promise was gone and all was lost. They needed to hear and tell the stories that speak of a God who still provides. And we do, too.

I cannot pretend to fully know the mind of God. I cannot tell you why the text tells us that God saw fit to test Abraham in this horrible way. God is God and I am not. This I do know: The very God who provides the ram and spares the boy is the same God who *shares* his own only begotten son with us to show us God's love for us face to face. This God does not intervene when the rabid cruelty of the world decides that Jesus must be destroyed. We love and preach and celebrate resurrection, and

[5] http://www.faithandleadership.com/sermons/ellen-f-davis-radical-trust

yet we don't get Easter without Good Friday. And it is the passion of Good Friday that tells me I am not alone when violence and vitriol have become commonplace, eliciting only yawns and shrugs. Faith is not a guarantee that all will work out neatly and tidily and on my terms like a Disney movie. Faith holds that the God who created the world in love is the same God who is even now working to redeem the entire creation from the worst we can come up with. So I need these stories, just as our exiled ancestors did, because they help me remember the God who is my shelter and my shade, my only true hope when the world grows dark. The breadth and depth of scripture teach me to look for a ram in the thicket, to listen for a voice that tells me that help has come, and to watch for ways God provides even now through the tears of a friend, the smile of a stranger, the notes of a favorite hymn, the poetry of a winsome prayer, and yes, a baby being baptized. I am grateful for a tradition that does not edit out the messy parts of the story of God and God's people, because I have yet to figure out a way to edit out the messiest parts of the life God has called me to live. I need the whole story; we need the whole story. For when we do our faithful best tell the whole story we remind ourselves and one another that God remains faithful to the promise and to the children of that promise even when the world has gone mad, perhaps especially when the world has gone mad. That's the story we know; that's the God we know, so that's the story we are called to share.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.