



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The Seventh Sunday After Trinity, July 30th, 2017

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

There are two categories of Christians today: Those who believe the Bible contains the inspired word of God and those who see it as a collection of myths; a prisoner of its own barbaric age – an age with very little to teach folks familiar with the mysteries of nuclear fission, the i-Phone, toilet tissue and Saran Wrap.

Challenge this notion and you are likely to be taken gently by the hand, figuratively speaking, led to the Book of Genesis, and shown an Old Testament lesson appointed for today: Genesis 22:1-18, the account of Abraham's attempt to sacrifice his son Isaac. Having done that, they will declare the case proven.

At first glance, it's hard to deny that neither Abraham nor God come out of this episode looking good. Abraham appears to be a foolish dupe, while God acts like a cruel and heartless practical joker. Abraham has committed himself entirely to God and taken an extraordinary leap of faith. He has given up family, friends, his high social standing in one of the most sophisticated societies the world has seen to go wandering, at his newly discovered God's behest, in a land he hardly knows – a stranger in a strange land.

And what is Abraham's reward for his remarkable leap of faith? Not much, one might be forgiven for thinking. True, he accumulates a certain degree of wealth, but no more than he could have expected had he remained in the

comfort and security of the city of Haran.

In return for the covenant he makes with God – under which he acknowledges God's sovereignty over him – God promises to make him "the father of many nations" and to give his descendants the land of Canaan to live in at some unspecified future date.

So far the benefits all seem to be on God's side: He's gotten Abraham to worship him in exchange for a bunch of pie-in-the-sky promises. To be sure, Abraham and his family survive God's destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. But it was God who put them in harm's way in the first place. If he hadn't ordered them to go wandering, they wouldn't have gone anywhere near Sodom and Gomorrah.

Abraham's most tangible reward is a legitimate son, Isaac, miraculously born to his wife, Sarah, long after she was past child bearing. It was, of course, just what they wanted. But, even so, it seems a paltry reward for the years of wandering about as homeless people.

This brings us to the episode related in the 22nd Chapter of Genesis: Instead of letting poor old Abraham enjoy his son, Isaac, in peace, God plays a really nasty trick on him. He tells Abraham to load up a donkey and take the boy to Mount Moriah, and sacrifice him as a burnt offering to demonstrate his obedience to God.

We know God doesn't intend to let him sacrifice

the boy. But this doesn't make God's behavior excusable – at least not from a 21st century perspective. How can a God of love put this unhappy man who has given up everything for him through three days of utter anguish?

It makes not a whit of difference that just as Abraham is about to plunge in the knife, God says: "I believe you. You needn't to go through with it." Isaac is terrified, lashed to the altar, with his dad is standing over him brandishing a dagger – not something likely to enhance their father/son relationship. But before we commit the sin of passing judgment on God, let us to consider God's purpose not just in "testing" Abraham's faith, but in his whole relationship with the patriarch and his family. God was beginning the process of revealing himself through Abraham and his descendants to mankind,

This was a more complicated process than it might at first appear. It was not something God could accomplish by suddenly materializing and saying: "Abracadabra! I'll grant you three wishes." God isn't the good fairy. He is our creator, our heavenly Father. He is almighty, all-seeing, omnipresent, omnipotent, eternal, etc.

These are incredibly complicated ideas to get across. How could a single human being, in a single lifetime, develop a mental picture of a being so radically different from ourselves?

The answer is God didn't expect Abraham, or anyone else, to develop such a picture within the span of one human life. The process of revelation took thousands of years. If we count it as beginning with Abraham, it took close on 3,000 years until it was completed in Jesus Christ. And that is a powerfully long lesson.

It took such a long time because human beings find it difficult to grasp the fact that God is very different from them selves. Indeed, it is especially a problem for modern Christians. When we conceive of God, we tend to picture him as a rational being rather like ourselves, only much more powerful and more intelligent. By now the process of revelation should have taught us this is not the case.

The lessons God taught Abraham seem today to be simple and straightforward. By the time Abraham was ordered to sacrifice Isaac, he had learned that God is holy; that he is perfectly righteous and just, and that there's a high price to pay for disobeying him.

He had learned all these things from experience. He'd personally witnessed God pass terrible judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah. Yet God had also taught Abraham that he's both merciful and perfectly loving.

Human sacrifice was the rule in Abraham's day. People of his culture believed the gods demanded the lives of their first-born children – the most precious thing they possessed.

One can imagine Abraham thinking that his new God, while different in virtually every respect from the pagan Gods, was in this one vital respect the same as the others – that he demanded proof in human blood that Abraham worshipped him above all things.

To teach him in the most emphatic way that this was not so, God let Abraham attempt to prove his devotion in the traditional manner. But he stopped him seconds before his knife plunged into the boy's heart to drive home the fact that God abhorred human sacrifice.

True, Abraham and Isaac must have suffered terrible anguish, but it would have been far outstripped by their joy at learning God not require them to sacrifice their children to him. The lesson was so dramatic it remained embedded in the Jewish people's conscientiousness for 1500 years.

Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac was a vitally important building block in God's revelatory process. Although it took place at the very beginning of the process, it foreshadowed its completion: The revelation of the full extent of God's love for us. It was revealed when God did something he forbade Abraham to do – when he offered his only begotten son, Jesus Christ, as "the full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world." *AMEN.*