

“On the other side of sacrifice”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
July 2, 2017

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Every time I read this story, I can't help but wonder: What was it like between Abraham and Isaac after this? I mean it must have been totally awkward, right? I picture Abraham avoiding eye contact and letting out this fake laugh, saying, “Ha... Ha... Fooled you! Bet you thought I was going to sacrifice you! You, silly kid! I was just messin' around... Please don't tell your mother.”

Those must have been some seriously uncomfortable family dinners. Honestly, I hope Isaac stuck it to his dad every chance he got. I picture Abraham picking up a knife to cut his food, and Isaac saying, “Uh oh, dad. Better be careful with that knife. Wouldn't want you accidentally sacrificing someone again, now would we?” And I can just hear Abraham's exasperation: “It was one time! Can't we move on already?”

Truth is it's hard to know what was going through Isaac's mind. Over the course of this sermon series, we've heard from Abraham, a grieving father who faces pain for the sake of love, and we've heard from those who are silenced and terrorized by this text: Isaac's mother Sarah, the slave woman Hagar, and Ishmael, the *other* son. But there's very little to go on when it comes to Isaac. He says and does very little.

What are we to make of this boy who is bound by his own father?

Jewish rabbis have long debated whether Isaac knew what was going to happen. Because if he didn't, he's a victim, plain and simple. For him, this is a story about violence, a twisted record of who's expendable. But if he did know—if he knowingly faced his death—that would make him as much an example of faith as Abraham. Kathryn Schifferdecker writes that “first-century rabbis, with no connection to Christianity but with ample experience of Roman crucifixion, said... ‘Isaac carries the wood for the sacrifice like one who carries his own cross.’ ”

See, Isaac knows his father. He knows his different laughs, how his nose crinkles when he's happy, how his voice rises a pitch or two when he's lying. Isaac's obviously old enough to understand ritual sacrifice and to carry the wood on his own; he might be 12 years old. He's heard about child sacrifice from his friends; it was a common practice in those parts. So it probably didn't take a genius to figure out what was happening once he saw that there was no animal for sacrifice. What's more: Abraham's an old man; Isaac could have run away or fought back the moment Abraham tried to bind him. But he didn't.

Now, we have to be careful here. There are many reasons why someone might not resist their attacker: fear, shock, dependency, shame, denial... love? We *must not* conflate the lack of resistance with consent. We must give no quarter to abuse, no apotheosis.

But maybe this isn't that story; maybe this is a story about self-sacrifice, about handing one's life over to God. But if that's true, and that's a big *if*, why would Isaac do that? Why would anyone do that?

We live in a culture that, despite all the hero fanfare, prizes self-preservation. We live for ourselves, or at best for our tribe—our family, our friends. If we take this career, or love this person, or help that stranger, or even love this God, we want to know what's in it for us. Is it pleasure, success, respect?

So when someone comes along, like Mother Theresa or Oscar Romero, or Jesus—someone who gives their whole life over to others, over to God—we have a hard time comprehending what could possibly drive such a sacrifice. Maybe you know someone like that: a teacher, a firefighter, a homeless worker, a single parent.

That's not who Isaac was initially. He was a spoiled boy, the privileged and favored son who lived only for himself. He figured that the injustices and hardships of the world were problems for other people—others like his half-brother Ishmael. God had promised his family a great life, and Isaac was the vehicle for that promise—the only life that mattered. But when that life was threatened, when Isaac saw the knife, his world was upended.

God whispered that the promise required a sacrifice—that if the world was going to be saved, if it was ever going to be free of this struggle and pain, if it was ever going to know prosperity, joy, and purpose, a life was going to have to be given in exchange. The promise could only be realized through an act of selflessness.

Isaac was thus confronted with a choice. Either he could live as a spoiled boy and see all hope lost, or he could give up his life and see a different kind of world—a better world—take root.

We know the choice he made. We do not hear him speak, but if we could, I imagine his final words might resemble those found etched in stone in honor of the men who died during the World War II Battle of Kohima: “When you go home, tell them of us and say, For your tomorrow, we gave our today.”

Isaac knew what those soldiers knew: hope is only possible when we are willing to live for more than ourselves. It was imperative that God's promise of blessing not be self-serving but be self-giving, founded not in avarice but in love. God needed to know that the people entrusted with this promise were worthy of it. Isaac accepted this.

And it wasn't just God who needed this. It was Isaac too. Isaac needed to know who he was and what kind of God he served. He needed to know that he was better, stronger, more compassionate, more courageous, than the boy who kept silent while Hagar and Ishmael were sent to their deaths. And he needed to know that *God* was better than this, better than the jealous, grasping, cruel god who demanded compensation in blood.

In choosing sacrifice, Isaac refused to conform to the pattern of this world, to harbor any thought of self-preservation, and chose instead to open his mind to the unconsidered possibility of who he and God could be (Romans 12:1-2).

As Jesus says in the Gospel of Mark, “Whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it” (8:35).

In being willing to lose his life, Isaac gains it. He becomes God’s chosen, not because of what he receives but because of what he gives. In this ancient bildungsroman, Isaac is tested and discovers integrity he never knew he had. He comes face to face with the God who gives life, who brings hope out of death. Abraham and Isaac call this God “the One who provides.” We call her Resurrection.

On the other side of one selfless sacrifice is a chance. A chance for a better world, a better self, a better God—not a god who takes from the world in blood and fire but a God who saves the world in love and tears from a cross.

Are we prepared, like Isaac, to turn our lives over to God, to take a chance and learn who we are and what kind of God we serve? I’m not talking only about risking death. I’m talking about something even harder: the daily devotion of each hour, each minute, to God and to the promise that one day all children shall live and love without threat. And we shall name them Isaac, meaning “Laughter.”

**Amen.**