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Genesis 22:1-14

Romans 6:12-23

Matthew 10:40-42

Today we encounter one of those “larger than life” stories in the Old Testament, the story of Abraham and Isaac. In these stories that have been handed down by word and mouth and print for thousands of years, it is always advisable to approach the story carefully so as to get a full appreciation. The characters in the story today are Abraham, Isaac, and God. But the background of the story also includes Abraham’s wife, Sarah.

As you may recall, just a couple of weeks ago, Abraham and Sarah are visited by God, who tells them that they will have a son. Sarah particularly is dumbfounded. For she knows that they are older and that she is past the age of childbearing. She is so dumbfounded that she laughs at the idea. But at the end of that story Isaac is born.

Isaac is the first “miracle child” in the Bible. He is called that and “a child of promise.”

He was not supposed to be born. And yet he was. Further, Abraham and Sarah were to be parents of a new nation, a new people. Isaac was the first child born toward that promise. And so in today’s reading God approaches Abraham and says to him, **Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.**

So Abraham gets up early, gathers what he will need for the journey, some wood for the fire, two young men to help, a donkey, and Isaac himself. When he spots the place where the sacrifice is to take place, he leaves the two young men with the donkey. He then has Isaac carry the wood for the fire while Abraham carried the fire and the knife for the sacrifice. This is in the day before matches.

When they approach the appointed place Isaac asks about where the lamb is for the burnt offering. Abraham says that God will provide the lamb for the burnt offering.

Abraham then built an altar and laid out the wood for the fire. He then took Isaac and bound him to the altar on top of the wood. He is about to kill him when God calls to him and tells him not to harm Isaac. The voice says, **Abraham, Abraham!** He answered, **Here I am.** God says, **Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.**

Then Abraham spots a ram caught in a thicket, and the ram is offered as a sacrifice instead of Isaac.

There is tremendous pathos in this story. There are things indicated but not said. First, after Isaac, the miracle child, is born God says take him and offer him as a sacrifice. It is an astonishing reversal. For the child Isaac was to be the first of a new people.

I have read this story many times, and I still wait for Abraham to object when God speaks to him. But there is no objection. Abraham prepares to do what God told him to do.

The pathos is turned up when Abraham has Isaac carry the wood that will be used for his own death. And then it is turned up a notch again when Abraham binds Isaac to the altar and prepares to kill him. There is even a pathos associated with Isaac himself. For we can imagine Isaac saying, "That is the last trip I'm going on with him."

It is hard to stay with this story. For who wants to follow the details of how a father is willing to kill his son for the sake of his relationship to God?

But as hard as the story is to stay with, it is also hard to forget.

I have found it helpful to work backwards in this story. For example, we could ask the question, “What kind of relationship did God have with Abraham that he would ask such a thing?” And, “What kind of relationship with God did Abraham have that he would move to kill his son without question?”

I think probably it is hard for us to imagine a relationship that was so loving, so trusting, so devoted that the sacrifice of a loved one would be done without question.

And going with that difficulty, we could quickly characterize the story as being Jewish, or ancient, or about rarefied figures with whom we have no connection. Then it becomes easy to put the story on the shelf marked “I have no idea.”

But, if you dare live with the discomfort that this story brings up in a person, then it will cause you to ask some provocative questions. Like, “Could we consider that God and Abraham had an uncommon relationship, an uncommon love for each other?”

It would be the uncommon love that would have God asking Abraham to sacrifice his son in the first place. It would be the uncommon love that would have Abraham being compliant without question.

Is it possible to love someone so much that you would give your life for them? The answer to that is “yes.” For there are many examples of loved ones offering their lives in place of their loved ones. Perhaps some of us have been in that position before.

Is it possible to love someone so much that you would offer the life of one who is most dear to you? That is what is asked here? And so it takes the question of uncommon love a step further. The story is about uncommon love, about radical devotion.

Abraham has taken on an increased prominence after 9/11 because he is the common ancestor for Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. And I think it is fitting that he would occupy that place uniquely. For we can see that his love of God was uncommon, if not unheard of. And we can see why God considered him and Sarah the parents of many nations.

But perhaps the final provocative question this story raises is, “Am I capable of such love?” And beyond specific examples of fathers and sons, “Am I capable of loving like I have never loved or never known?”

It is my experience that all of us are as capable of loving more as we will allow. The example of uncommon love in your life may have nothing to do with a child or a father.

But it would be a mistake and a loss for all of us if each of us did not consider her or himself capable of uncommon love. It is one of those things that may seem wonderful and terrible at the same time. When Abraham was faced with that question, he did not hesitate. When he did not hesitate he and Sarah became the parents of many nations. And humanity took a giant step forward. The decision of Abraham became permanently recorded in this story that has been told and read countless times. And this model of radical love has come down through the centuries to reappear as God gave us his Son, that he would live as one of us, that he would die as one of us, even on a cross. Amen.