

Having just heard the account of Abraham's testing by God, one might rightly expect to then have the preacher begin to expound upon the virtuous faith exhibited by this "friend of God." Indeed, both James and the author of Hebrews celebrate his unwavering obedience in their respective letters. Many are the teachers who would focus on how this obedience is prompt, if not immediate, or that it reflects a belief in God's ability to resurrect the dead. All of these are true and valid and beautiful. Yet, I feel that God has for us, gathered here and now, a slightly different focus to consider.

When we turn our attention to verses 6-13, Isaac comes to the foreground for a few brief lines. Abraham ties the wood for the offering unto the back of his son. The very wood upon which he is to be offered up! As he and his father continue on, now without their servants, the young man asks a question:

"Dad... I'm carrying an awful lot of wood here... and you've got some embers there to kindle the fire... but... uuhhh... where's the lamb? Where is the sacrifice that the Lord has commanded us to offer?"

After having come a few days' journey, I doubt this is the first time Isaac has realized that they did not bring any animals with them that would be suitable for sacrifice. It makes you wonder what has been going through his head.

Then, his father replies, "God will provide the lamb we are to sacrifice." Isaac, to his own credit, accepts Abraham's answer, unflinching. He continues on with his father, carrying the wood for his *own* sacrifice. I wonder how much more it hurt Abraham, tempted him not to follow through, to watch his son carry that load of wood! How confusing it must have been to Isaac when his father, after building the altar, ties him

up! Yet, this is another testimony to the faith that the young man, himself, has. As Calvin points out in his commentary, the fact that the passage lacks an account of a struggle prior to Isaac's being bound (which he most likely would have won), implies that he was, perhaps, a willing sacrifice. His faith in the word of his father, that God would, Himself, provide a lamb for the sacrifice. His faith that God would be true to His promises to Abraham, allows him to submit to being bound and placed on the wood as the sacrifice.

Some 1900 years later, a similar drama begins to unfold. In a garden not far from where Abraham and Isaac would have walked, a young Rabbi questions His Father. This inquisition, however, comes with knowledge that this Rabbi is to be a sacrifice. The questioning is more a pleading that there may be some other way. In the end however, this Rabbi, Jesus, trusts His Father, and another willing sacrifice is shown. After being betrayed, arrested, tried, convicted and sentenced to die, the wood for the sacrifice is set on His back. This, in my thinking, is the most striking similarity in the two stories. Both men are made to carry the wood upon which they are to be offered up!

In the story of Christ's crucifixion, however, no one stays the hand of the executioner. No voice calls out with the authority to end the horrific scene. Indeed, the loudest voice may have, in fact, been the Victim, Himself. He cried out, confirming that He had been abandoned. Forsaken. Jesus Christ tastes the pain that Isaac was spared. God the Father feels the loss that Abraham was prevented from feeling. It is at this point that the two stories seem to diverge.

After the voice of the angel stops Abraham from ending the life of Isaac, his earlier prophesy that God would provide the sacrifice, finds fulfillment when a ram is found stuck in a tree. Isaac is, presumably, unbound and goes off to bring the ram to the altar, in his place.

You see, the stories never really diverged at all. While there are many similarities between Isaac and Jesus, between Abraham and God the Father, the strongest connection is actually between Christ and the ram. I say this connection is the strongest of those in these narratives because it is these two "characters" who actually suffer the pain of becoming the sacrifice. Each takes the place of someone else. The ram takes Isaac's place on the altar. Jesus Christ takes our place on the cross.

Some would question the idea that Christ went to the cross as a substitute for sinful man. These would argue that it is unjust that a righteous entity would suffer in the place of an unrighteous being, or that punishment isn't part of the cross at all despite what is said in scripture that "God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement..." and that "[h]e did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished." (Rom 3:25)

Others have argued that the death of Christ on the cross is not a legitimate "sacrifice" because God knew that He would be resurrected. This misses the point! The sacrifice of God is not, simply the bodily death of Christ. Rather, the Father's sacrifice, which includes Jesus' pain and suffering, also includes the breaking of the fellowship that God the Father and God the Son have shared for all of eternity. So the

sacrifices of God begin as He watches His beloved Son on the journey towards Calvary. He knows that the "pain of searing loss" is about to be felt by both Father and Son.

When He willingly accepts the cross, Christ completes the life of righteousness. It is this perfect life that proves to be the acceptable sacrifice. The blood that is spilled is the only thing sufficient to cover the sins of the world. The breaking of the Body, which we will commemorate today in Communion, imparts that life of righteousness to those who have, by faith tied themselves to the death of Christ. Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans (6:3-5) that this is what is symbolized in baptism.

Where should we look for ourselves in this story? Certainly, Scripture itself calls us to look to Abraham as an example of strong faith in God. Christians throughout history plead with us to imitate Christ. What if you put yourself in the place of Isaac? Can you imagine? Close your eyes and picture it with me. As you stand with your father, witnessing the sacrifice of the ram, what goes through your mind? Think back to the burden of carrying the wood, the very wood that now burns beneath the ram. Remember the confusion you felt when your father explained what was about to happen as he began binding your hands and feet. The fear you felt when you saw his knife glint in the sunlight. The relief and awe you felt at the voice of the angel calling out wash over you again. The overwhelming gratitude you feel towards God for having provided the ram to take your place.

Now, keeping your eyes closed, project yourself forward that 1900 years to Golgotha, the Place of the Skull, Calvary. If you could stand there with Our Father, witness to the crucifixion of Christ, what would go through your mind? Think of His

burden, carrying that Cross out from Jerusalem, on which the Lord is hung. Think of the burden of sin that you carried before giving it to God. Some here are still carrying that burden. Think back to how lost you felt before you knew God, or lost you now feel and know that He wants to give you direction. Remember the fear you felt when you realized your condition as a sinner, the precarious position of not knowing where you stood with God. Feel again the relief and awe that come from hearing Jesus say "It is finished!" He has done everything that is necessary for you to enjoy fellowship with the Father! Look at the cross, at Christ who, praise God, is now risen! Thank God that he provided THE LAMB to take your place... to take my place... the place of everyone who would trust in the power of HIS NAME!

As you open your eyes, perhaps some to a whole new life, let us thank God for all that He has done and all that He can do!