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Genesis 22:1-19
January 25, 2009

Beyond any question, this must be the most profound theological moment of the Old Testament. It's raw with tension, palpable emotion, and yet it's puzzling. We're not sure that we understand it. There's actually something in us that recoils in the face of this story. The story is typical of the Bible. It does not tell us how Abraham felt, or how Isaac felt, or even what was in God's heart. But we can imagine. Think about the near loss of anyone whom we have loved. We think about the kind of love when you love someone, but you know that you are about to lose them...C.S. Lewis lived as a single man for a long, long time, and finally, late in life, found the love of his life named Joy. Shortly after, they were married and discovered that she had an inoperable cancer, that she would not live long. He wrote a letter to his very good friend, Dorothea Day, and in it he said, We soon learn to love what we know we must lose. I think what he's saying is, We've always loved those we know we must soon lose, but the love becomes different. It takes on a richer dimension. It is sweeter, but more poignant in some way, when we know that we will lose the one we love.

The whole notion of harming a child is problematical in associating God with it. I've made it something of my life's mission to try to help all of us think about this. People all the time attach God to terrible things that happen. There's a car accident and a child is killed, then somebody says, "Oh, it was God's will." Or a child gets some terrible disease and suffers horribly. And someone will say, "Oh, it is God's will." I will always side with those who say a God who gives a child cancer or a God who kills a child in a car accident is a God that we should have nothing to do with. Our God is not a God who harms children. Our God is about life. Our God is about love.

What is the story about? I tried to study a lot for the sermon and I probed great theologians and authorities and found some real wisdom from Woody Allen, who did a little shtick on Abraham and Isaac one time that was pretty funny. Abraham heard this thing from God and somebody asked, Was that really God who said that, and Abraham, according to Woody Allen, said, Well, he was sure it was God. And the reason that he was sure it was God, he said, Well, the voice was deep and resonant and well modulated. Nobody in the desert can get a rumble going like that. And he thinks about it, and God says, Well, that was my voice, but I was joking. I didn't mean for you to take it seriously. And Abraham, he says, I'm sorry, I didn't get the joke, but God surely my willingness to sacrifice my child proves my faithfulness to you. And God responded by saying, all it proves is that some men will follow any order no matter how asinine as long as it comes from a resonant, well-modulated voice.

It calls us to ask some questions. Just because somebody said, God said. Just because God's name is attached to something, is it really of God? Think of the wars that have been launched in the name of God and all of the bloodshed. Or think of the people who have a decadent, pleasure-me first, life, and they assume it's because God is so pleased with them.

Just because we attach God to something does not mean that it is of God. I can't pretend to plum all the depths of the story or to explain it to you. It's mysteries, it's hidden secrets. I do have a few thoughts thought that I would share it for you, for a fodder for your future conversations and over lunch today. One is this: A lot of the times we begin a story by saying once upon a time. Once upon a

time... And some stories in the Bible are, in fact, once upon a time. It's not about us; it's about something that happened once upon a time. I thought of this a few years ago. I was preaching on the temptations of Jesus, and Jesus, you know, is tempted to turn stones into bread and to leap off the temple and to possess the kingdoms of the Earth. And I was working on this, and I thought, you know, I've never been tempted to turn stones into bread or to jump off a building or to possess the kingdoms of the world, and it occurred to me that the story is not about me. It's not about me battling temptation. No, it's a story about Jesus and that Jesus was able to resist the most extraordinary temptation. I am not able to do that. I cave in to the very slightest temptation, and so do you. And that's why it's God, that we have a savior who once upon a time did not cave in to temptation. The story of Abraham and Isaac. There was about to be a sacrifice. The angel intervenes and the word is God will provide the sacrifice. Once upon a time, God provided the sacrifice. God sent his son down Earth to take our place, to love us so much, to die for us. It happened once upon a time. I cannot die to save you, and you cannot die to save me, and we cannot execute our own forgiveness, but once upon a time God did. And we may fall on our knees and be grateful.

There's something else in the story that we should explore. It seems to say that faith, faith in the story, is a matter of not withholding what is precious to us. And you and I have a bad habit, don't we, of withholding what is precious to us from God. We'll give God some change that's left over that doesn't really matter that much to us, and if we have a little spare time we will give it to God, but we have a way of withholding what is precious to us, and this is a story that says do not withhold what is precious. It may be your time, it may be something that you have, it may be your passion, it may be your very life, it may be those who are close to you. We're not called to withhold those things from God. I can understand this withholding because we live in a culture of fear. And in a culture of fear, you hang on tight, you lock everything down. But this story says do not withhold what is precious from God. The secret that we discover in that is, we were clinging to something because in fear we thought we cannot lose this, but then we hang on like that to what is precious to us and we actually choke the life out of it. God, why do we cling to what is precious and we lose it? Instead, when we do not withhold, when we offer it to God it's not a sacrifice that makes us miserable, it is our true delight, it is our true joy. We understand the true purpose of what five minutes before we were clinging to. It's something to think about.

Another thing to think about is this: Once upon a time. In the days when the Bible was written, once upon a time Israel's neighbors as part of their religion sacrificed children. All of Israel's neighbors; the Babylonians, the Hittites, they all sacrificed children. It would be time to go to war, then to curry the favor of the Gods, they would take the child of one of the mighty warriors and they would sacrifice that child. Or the crops would not be coming in. To try to get the Gods to bring rain they would sacrifice one of the children. Perhaps the whole point of Genesis 22 is to say, All of your neighbors sacrificed children, but in Israel it will not be so. In Israel, we will not sacrifice our children. In Israel, God does not require the sacrifice of a child because God loves us. We don't have to do such things to curry God's favor. Maybe that's the point of the whole story.

Let me add this, our instinct that says it is never good to harm children is correct and true, and we need to hang on to that. And that makes me today have to ask some hard questions of us. Be patient with me, but think about these things. If it, in fact, is not a good thing ever to harm children, if we would never sacrifice a child, then the questions that I have are these. A lot of us in this room are parents or are related to children in some way, responsible for children. Children are in our lives in

some ways. Here are some questions. If we love our children and would do them no harm, why then do we offer our children up so willingly on the altar of the entertainment industry? We put our children mindlessly in front of the television or in front of the Internet or in front of the X-Box or in front of the Blackberry or in front of whatever it is we have. And our children are constantly bombarded and titillated by images that are not at all morally good. They never have time to reflect, they never have time to daydream, they never have time just to be, and they come to be addicted to what is being poured into them by some mindless media. If we love our children and would not harm them, then why do we offer them up so willingly and mindlessly on that altar? If we love our children and would not harm them, why do we offer them up on the altar of the shopping mall? We are great consumers and we teach our children to be great consumers. They learn how to shop, they learn how to possess. You must have more and more toys and the person with the most toys at the end of the game wins, and we are great consumers. If we love our children, why do we sacrifice them on this altar? If we love our children, why do we sacrifice our children on the altar of business? You know, we're really, really busy people. We're just frantic. We'll run around the counters, crammed full, but then our children, good grief, they put us into shape. They're at ballet and then they're at soccer and then they're at here, and they're going here and the children are just like, Oooohhh. It's just so frantic and it's so... Why do we think this is good for our children that they never have time to be still, just to be, just to rest. They're going to be addicted to stress just as we are. Here's the hardest one that I need to raise for you today. It's hard to talk about, but I'm going to. Every now and then I try to take stock of what I'm hearing in counseling. Sometimes they're trends, they're sort of issues that people face, and I can tell you this: Since Christmas, there's one issue that I've heard over and over and over from people in counseling, and I have to talk about today, and it is alcohol. Alcohol. Since Christmas, I can't tell you how many people...It's more than once a day I'm hearing a story of another family that's broken, another problem, another situation all related to alcohol. Let me tell you this, and I know you don't want to hear it, but it's just the truth: In this community, we drink too much. In this community, we drink too much. It's just become kind of the social oil, the grease. It's just, Oh, it's just alcohol, it's just so cool and it's so chic and everybody's drinking cool wines, and you've got to have it, you can't have fun without it, you've got to have more alcohol. It's just the center of everything. And then we're puzzled. People say to me, Oh no, I've got it under control, I've got it under control, but then people land in my office and they didn't have it under control when they thought they had it under control for so long, and another marriage is shattered. My real question today, though, it doesn't have to do with the adults, it has to do with the children. Why on Earth do we think that if we make alcohol the true center of our existence, if we put alcohol in the place that the Holy Spirit is supposed to play in our lives, that's what motivates us, that's what inspires us, that's what brings us joy and delight. If we give that place to alcohol, why then are we surprised the way I hear parents being surprised? They come into my office and say, My 15 year-old was drunk the other night and it's horrible. They say, How did that happen? Or my child went off to college and got a drinking and driving charge. We're just so stunned by this. If we love our children and we would do them no harm, why do we constantly offer them up on the altar of alcohol? Brothers and sisters, it is not God's will for any child, ever, to be harmed.

And there's another piece of this. There's an article in this morning's paper, in The Charlotte Observer, a great column by Taylor Batten about a housing summit. Kevin Wright went and represented us there the other day. There's a lot of talk around Charlotte about housing the homeless. Part of our church's strategic plan is affordable housing. You know, in Charlotte, every day and every night there are four or five thousand, not homeless people, but homeless children. Children. I don't

like it when my children are out after 9:00 p.m. I wouldn't like the idea of them being out in the cold. But every night, we have four or five thousand children in Charlotte who do not have a roof over their head. We believe God's calling us to do something about this. And we don't think God's calling us to reduce that number to 2,000 or to 200 or to 20, we think God's calling us not to rest until the number of homeless children in Charlotte is zero. See, what I've been thinking about this week is in this Abraham and Isaac story, Abraham goes up on that mountain, and he thinks that he will lose his child. He thinks that he will never see him again, but then the child is restored to him. And he came down the mountain. You know where they went, they went home. And what was that homecoming like? You don't just come home after that kind of day, do you, and flip on the TV and have a few chips? Yeah, good day. Cool. No, after a day like that, you're still, you embrace, I guess in tears. It's coming home. Imagine soldiers who have been away for a long time in harm's way in Iraq or in Afghanistan and they come home. It's a time of great joy, a time to sit and to be still. It is God's will for every child to have a home. It's what heaven is advertised to us as being that as the end of time God will gather us home to be with God. God wants home for all of us. And so then the question is, what do we do with our time? If you have some narrow escape, if you barely make it, you don't just keep on business as usual. You ask questions like, Why has God put me here. Why am I existing? And the answer isn't, Oh, to shop. Oh, to watch TV. It's just so cool, isn't it? And, Oh, just to have another drink. Give me another drink, please. It's just so much fun, isn't it? I don't think that's why God's put us here. I think God's put us here, if you remember what God did once upon a time, to love each other, to notice there are children out in the cold tonight. We can't tolerate that. God has put us here. God, according to the story, will provide. The question is, do we get that? Do we believe that? Is that what our life really is about? God will provide. It's home.