

Gracious Mercy  
Genesis 22:1-14  
July 16, 2023  
Pastor Sarah Wiles

**22** After these events, God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!"

Abraham answered, "I'm here."

<sup>2</sup> God said, "Take your son, your only son whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah. Offer him up as an entirely burned offering there on one of the mountains that I will show you." <sup>3</sup> Abraham got up early in the morning, harnessed his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, together with his son Isaac. He split the wood for the entirely burned offering, set out, and went to the place God had described to him.

<sup>4</sup> On the third day, Abraham looked up and saw the place at a distance. <sup>5</sup> Abraham said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will walk up there, worship, and then come back to you."

<sup>6</sup> Abraham took the wood for the entirely burned offering and laid it on his son Isaac. He took the fire and the knife in his hand, and the two of them walked on together. <sup>7</sup> Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father?"

Abraham said, "I'm here, my son."

Isaac said, "Here is the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the entirely burned offering?"

<sup>8</sup> Abraham said, "The lamb for the entirely burned offering? God will see to it, my son." The two of them walked on together.

<sup>9</sup> They arrived at the place God had described to him. Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He tied up his son Isaac and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. <sup>10</sup> Then Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to kill his son as a sacrifice. <sup>11</sup> But the Lord's messenger called out to Abraham from heaven, "Abraham? Abraham?"

Abraham said, "I'm here."

<sup>12</sup> The messenger said, "Don't stretch out your hand against the young man, and don't do anything to him. I now know that you revere God and didn't hold back your son, your only son, from me."<sup>13</sup> Abraham looked up and saw a single ram caught by its horns in the dense underbrush. Abraham went over, took the ram, and offered it as an entirely burned offering instead of his son. <sup>14</sup> Abraham named that place "the Lord sees." That is the reason people today say, "On this mountain the Lord is seen."

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This is an awful story. It makes my stomach hurt to read it. There's an argument to be made for not reading it at all. But skipping it won't make it go away, so we might as well face it and see if we can wrestle a blessing from it.

A friend of mine summed up 3 ways to look at this story. There's the glass half full reading which is, God provided a ram. So, it's fine. All fine! And there's the glass half empty reading which is, that's an obscene thing to ask someone to do as a test of obedience. I'm probably a glass half empty person on this one. God providing a ram at the last minute is better than the alternative, but it's still rotten.

But my friend suggested a third way. Maybe this story is actually saying God is *not* like this. One way to read the Bible is to read it as a record of people's understandings of their encounters with the Divine. Those encounters, like all human encounters with the Divine, were shaped by their time and place and culture. As those things changed, people's understanding of God changed, and the Bible records those transformations.

Maybe this is a story that narrates a new understanding of God. Abraham understands more about God as the story goes on, and the point is that Abraham's God is a God who doesn't want us to sacrifice our children. That might seem obvious. But it hasn't always been. In fact, for much of our history the assumption was the opposite—sometimes gods do demand the sacrifice of our children.

There are references to child sacrifice throughout the Bible. In Leviticus there are rules telling people not to sacrifice their children to the Canaanite gods—which means some folks were, in fact, doing just that and had to be told to stop. Prophets continued to rail against the practice. And most haunting of all to me is an obscure verse in 1 Kings 16:34 that says that when Jericho was rebuilt, the foundations were laid at the cost of the king's oldest son, Abiram, and the gates were hung at the cost of the youngest son, Segub. For a long time, people thought you really might need to sacrifice your children. Thank God we don't do that anymore. We would never sacrifice our children.

Except—we do.

11 million US children live in poverty, including 1 in 6 children under the age of 6.<sup>1</sup> They face hunger, homelessness, learning delays, disability, chronic illness, and death. We sacrifice these children because of how we choose to arrange our society and distribute wealth. We could make different choices.

Of course, there's the toll of gun violence. In the US nearly 4,000 children are killed and 15,000 are wounded by guns each year. "That's an average of [52] American children every day. And the effects of gun violence extend far beyond those struck by a bullet: An estimated three million children witness a shooting each year."<sup>2</sup> That affects their lives forever. Let us be clear. We are sacrificing children on behalf of a gun industry which makes more than 9 billion dollars a year in profit.<sup>3</sup>

And we shouldn't forget that companies like Target, and Ford, and Tyson, and Ben & Jerry's employ immigrant children as young as 10 who have arrived here after traumatic journeys fleeing violence in their home countries seeking refuge here<sup>4</sup> These corporations employ these children in clear violation of all labor laws or basic human care. These children are sacrificed on the altar of greed for endless profit and stockholder gains.

Abraham believed God asked him to sacrifice Isaac. It was awful, but not surprising. Everyone knew that was how it worked sometimes. So, Abraham began to do as he believed God had commanded him. He gathered the supplies and took Isaac and began walking up the mountain. But—and I think this is one of Abraham's most important virtues—he kept listening.

When my grandmother encountered preachers she didn't think much of, she would often say, "He says God called him... but he must have hung up before God finished talking."

Abraham didn't hang up. He kept listening, and as he listened, he heard something different, a new word. Abraham came to believe that God does *not* want us to sacrifice our children.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.childrensdefense.org/the-state-of-americas-children/soac-2023-child-poverty>

<sup>2</sup> <https://everytownresearch.org/report/the-impact-of-gun-violence-on-children-and-teens>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.everytown.org/the-gun-industry-rakes-in-billions-while-our-communities-pay-the-price>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/25/us/unaccompanied-migrant-child-workers-exploitation.html>

The prophet Micah put it this way, “Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with many torrents of oil? Should I give my oldest child for my crime, the fruit of my body for the sin of my spirit? [No.] God has told you, mortal, what is good and what the Lord requires from you: to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.” That’s it.

“Stop!” God said. “Don’t kill the boy!” And thank goodness Abraham kept listening, kept learning. He discovered in that moment that the God he had come to know through all those long years does not want us to sacrifice our children or each other—on any altar.

And if there is something that seems to demand the sacrifice of some lives, some children, then that voice is not the God of Abraham and Sarah and Hagar. It may be the voice of profit. It may be the voice of supposed security or freedom. But it is not the voice of the Living God who is Love.

It’s a pretty good litmus test, really. If the way we structure our communities, distribute our wealth, secure our borders, protect our freedoms, produce our goods, requires us to sacrifice some folks, count some kids as collateral damage, then that structure is not of God.

When we build the Beloved Community, no one is expendable. In the Body of Christ, everyone is needed—particularly those who seem weakest and most powerless. The consistent biblical metric for judging a way of life is how it affects the most vulnerable—the child in foster care, the widow just scraping by, having to choose between food and medication, the immigrants harvesting our food and dying of heat in the desert. “Stop!” God said. “Don’t kill the boy.”

When we create community centered around Christ, not only do the most vulnerable begin to flourish and flower, but we are also set free. We are set free from a way of life based on fear, and pursuit of constant productivity and gain, and the need to somehow make ourselves worthy.

“Stop!” God said. “Don’t kill the boy.” And there, out of the corner of his eye, Abraham caught a glimpse of another way—a way of life that is free, and abundant, and deeply, profoundly good. May we, too, keep listening. Keep learning. Keep living more fully, day by day, into the commonwealth of God where no one is sacrificed, and all are loved and cherished. Amen.

~ Sarah Wiles, 2023