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Lent 1 – Genesis 22:1-18 – The Real Length of Love

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It's one thing to say, "I love you," and it's another thing to prove it. Those of us who once again took part in Valentine's Day rituals this week know that full well, don't we? Saying "I love you" is important – significant others need to hear that – but we also need demonstrations of that love. Cards, gifts, flowers, dinners, dates, chocolates, chocolate-covered strawberries – a tradition in my house – maybe even a love poem, which I admit I have failed to produce for too many years running now.

We understand that love in the heart naturally shows itself in our words and actions, and that was a truth that God taught Abraham in a very striking way in our sermon text for today. Far from red roses and blue violets and heart-shaped chocolates, God told Abraham that the way he could show his love for God was by sacrificing his son Isaac as a burnt offering. But actually, God wanted to teach Abraham and all of us a lesson about the real length of love: it's not the love that we show to God by faithfully obeying his Word, as much as he loves to see that. It's the love that God shows to us by giving his Son, Jesus Christ.

Our story starts out by saying that God *tested* Abraham, and on this first Sunday of Lent when we always hear that Satan *tempted* Jesus in the wilderness, it's important for us to understand the difference between a test and a temptation. Actually, it's the same Hebrew word that's used here in our text that can be translated either way – sometimes from our perspective a test and a temptation might seem the same – but the difference is in the intended outcome. Satan *tempts* for evil, to try to hurt us and make us fall and fail. But God *tests* for good, to strengthen us, to refine our faith, to reinforce the truths he wants to teach us so we can be that much more confident of our relationship with him in the end.

So God calls to Abraham and says, "*Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac*" and sacrifice him as a burnt offering to me. Well if you remember Abraham's history, this must have felt like a dagger to the heart and God was twisting the knife. Your son... your *only* son... whom you *love* so much, whom you waited for so long... Isaac, who has brought you so much *laughter* and joy, whom I gave to you as a miracle of my grace... now give him back. Abraham and his wife Sarah hadn't been able to have children earlier in their lives. Abraham was 75 years old when God promised that he and Sarah would have a child through whom God would bring the line of the Savior into this world, and it wasn't until he was 100 years old that God finally delivered. Now Abraham was maybe as old as 120, and is God going back on his promise after all this time? And to make matters worse, God said to sacrifice him as a burnt offering – that meant slaughtering him, pouring out his blood, and burning him to ash. If that thought doesn't make a parent's stomach turn, then what would?

You can imagine Abraham having some misgivings or objections, but what does he do? He gets up early, he loads his donkey, he gathers his servants, he cuts the wood, and he gets going. Abraham's response is immediate, his preparation is complete, nothing about this is half-hearted. The whole point of the burnt offering God told him to make was to demonstrate total devotion and surrender to God's Will and purposes, and that's what Abraham was doing here. Nothing about this made sense. It seemed to contradict God's promises. Abraham's fatherly instincts must have resisted this with every fiber of his being. But no – this was how Abraham could demonstrate that God was his first allegiance and love, and that nothing else would take his place – not even his only son. Abraham had to trust God unconditionally, because in the face of irreconcilable circumstances, there was nothing else he could do.

So on they went – a 50 mile journey to the north that took three days to make. Plenty of time for doubts to enter Abraham's mind, plenty of time to turn back, but still they persevered and pressed on. And when finally they came to the place, Abraham said something very telling to his servants: "*We will worship and then we will come back to you.*" Difficult as this must have been, this was truly an act of worship for Abraham, because no matter what his mind and emotions may have told him, his reverence and love and trust in God shined through despite it all. *We* will worship and *we* will come back, he said – if there was anything Abraham was sure about in that moment, it was that God does not lie and his promises do not fail. Isaac was the son of God's promise to him, so no matter what was about to happen up there on that mountain, Isaac was coming back again because God had plans for him that still needed to be fulfilled. After all, God gave Isaac to him miraculously when he was born in the first place; and if God needed to give him back again by miraculously even raising the dead, then he certainly could do it.

And so when Isaac recognized that things weren't totally adding up here, Abraham showed the same absolute reliance on God that God wants all his people to have. Isaac asked where the animal was for the sacrifice, and Abraham said, "*God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering.*" Whether he knew he was being prophetic right then or not, I don't know. But he was absolutely right. When they got to the top of the mountain, Abraham made the altar, arranged the wood, bound Isaac – who showed great faith himself here! – and then he even raised the knife, fully intent on completing the sacrifice that God sent him to make.

But then God stopped him. Remember the difference between a temptation and a test? It was the *intent*. God's intention for Abraham was to strengthen and purify his trust toward God, and Abraham's intention was to demonstrate his total dedication to God. As far as God was concerned, Abraham completed that sacrifice in spirit; he didn't need to follow through all the way because he proved that he was willing to do whatever God asked of him, and not let anything or anyone get in the way. God was fully satisfied with Abraham's sacrifice, because Abraham ultimately was giving to God his whole heart in faith.

God never wanted Abraham to actually slaughter his son. He is very clear throughout the rest of the Bible that human life is a gift to be cherished, and sacrificing it in the name of benefiting oneself before God is vile and detestable. No, God in a very graphic way here was teaching Abraham the real length of love – love that extends even further than life here in this world, because God promises us so much more beyond it in eternity with him. Even if we have to lay down our lives here out of faithfulness to God, he has the power to give them back – in heaven, and in resurrection.

By faith, Abraham stood up to the devil’s temptation, and the LORD delivered him. He passed the LORD’s test, and came out that much stronger and better for it, with a renewed appreciation for God’s power and plan. He showed us what it really means to keep God’s 1st and Greatest Commandment, to fear, love, and trust in God above all things. For Abraham and for us, to *fear* God was to *revere* God, to give him and his Will our highest respect no matter how difficult it might be. To *love* God means giving him the #1 place in your heart, not letting anything else take away from him, but rather leading everything else in our lives up to him – parent, child, spouse, friend, or anything else. And to *trust* God means to rely on him fully, to *entrust* control of our lives and eternities entirely to him, and to take him at his Word, whether we always understand what he’s up to in the moment or not, because the fact is what he’s up to is the same thing he’s been up to since the days of Abraham: bringing forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life to everyone who believes in him.

And that’s important for us to understand the real length of love, because as much as we marvel at Abraham’s willingness and dedication here, God’s is so much greater for us. God doesn’t ask anything of us that he himself hasn’t already done even more so. The real length of love is seen not in what he demands of us; it’s seen in what he demonstrates for us. So look back at where God sent Abraham to make this sacrifice. He sent him to the region of Moriah, it says. If that name rings a bell, it’s because Mount Moriah became the temple mount in Jerusalem many years later. That’s where God promised to forgive the sins of his people through the sacrifices of bulls and lambs for example, and that’s where our Lord Jesus was sentenced to die as the true Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

See, these sacrifices were meant to teach some important lessons about the length of God’s love. When a sacrifice was made for sin, that taught the bare truth that the wages of sin is death. Sin *causes* death. Every time we respect the opinions of scientists and politicians and celebrities more than the Word of our God; every time we love people and possessions and activities and traditions more than God; every time we trust our senses, our reason, even the laws of nature more than God himself – that’s nothing to shrug at and say that’s just the way the world is nowadays. That is sin that deserves death!

But God’s love for us was so great that he provided a substitute so that death would not have to be ours. The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:23) – and the way that God has always given that gift is by sending a substitute to deliver it. Abraham had faith that God himself would provide a lamb for the burnt offering there on Mount Moriah, and God did provide a ram “*instead of his son.*” But really, that only staved off Isaac’s *physical* death, and only for a while. Not until Jesus Christ, the true lamb of God, came was there a substitute who made the perfect sacrifice to pay for all our sins, to deliver us from spiritual and eternal death, and to assure us of life with God forever.

See, Abraham’s love for God was great, but it would have meant nothing without God’s so-much-greater love for him. God gave Isaac to Abraham as a miracle child in his old age, and although Abraham was willing to give him back, Isaac didn’t know about it until right at the end when his life was ultimately spared from sacrifice. But God gave Jesus to us as a miracle child conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He knew the whole time what he was here to do as our perfect substitute, yet he still went ahead with it willingly. He *did* lay down his life in sacrifice for our sake, because he knew that was the only way to redeem us. And finally, he rose up again from death as our victorious Savior, to prove that nothing can separate us from the love of God. That’s the real length of love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 4:10).

Yes, it’s one thing to say, “I love you,” and it’s another thing to prove it. Chances are God is not going to ask you to prove your love for him in the way that he asked Abraham, but he almost certainly will ask you to bear crosses as you follow him in your life that may seem heavy and hard. In those days, don’t look to yourself, your own strength, your own love. The real length of love is the span of the cross on which Jesus stretched out his hands and died for you. Because of him and his love, you too can stand up to the devil’s temptations. You too can persevere and pass God’s tests. You too can come to know God’s love and trust God’s plans and appreciate God’s purposes that much more clearly, no matter how difficult they might seem in the moment. Like Abraham said, ours is not a God who *takes*; ours is a God who *provides*, and he has proven that in the greatest of ways. Abraham spared Isaac in the end, but so great is our heavenly Father’s love for us that he did not spare his one and only Son. And because of that perfect sacrifice for us, God *has* provided forgiveness and salvation for our souls, he has provided grace and every blessing for our lives, and he will surely provide (because he himself has sworn it!) heaven and resurrection for our eternities. God grant it, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.