

Sermon: Enslaved to God

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at joint service of St. Giles, July 2, 2023)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The *Sacrifice of Isaac* by Caravaggio, the Italian painter sometimes referred to as the lesser Michelangelo, was produced between May 1603 and January 1604. It depicts the moment that Abraham, in obedience to God's command, is ready and poised to sacrifice his son Isaac, as the story unfolds in Genesis 22. A reproduction of the painting can be seen on this week's bulletin cover. We see Abraham's left hand pinning down a writhing Isaac, while holding a knife on his right. We see what appears to be an angle with one hand staying Abraham's drawn knife, and with the other pointing to a ram, a divine provision to take the place of Isaac. We see the expression on Isaac, a look of pure terror juxtaposed with the ram's placid look. Caravaggio perfectly captures this dramatic moment, a moment in which multiple faith communities trace back to Abraham as not only the father of nations, but the father of faith.

I have no doubt the central point to take away in this story is Jehovah Jireh, "the Lord will provide", as Abraham called that place, for it is said to this day, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided." (Genesis 22:14) I have no doubt the incredible relief felt by both Abraham and Isaac, that indeed God provided at the very last and right moment, the sacrifice, a ram in place of Isaac. The son was spared, the covenant intact, God is good. I have no doubt about that.

What I do question, and I hope we should all question is the seemingly blind obedience that was demanded of Abraham. Is it the same obedience that is demanded of us all, those who earnestly seek to be faithful?

The English word *obey* traces its root to the Latin word *audire*, that is 'to hear'. Obeying is hearing—it is a posture of attentiveness, a willingness to be present, a willingness to engage. We see this attentiveness in Abraham when God first called out to him, in the beginning of chapter 22. God said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." Ironically, as the story unfolds, we will hear Abraham uttering the same words two more

times. His attentiveness in all three occasions marks the dramatic turning points of this story.

Coming back to the first 'Here I am', after God has Abraham attention, God said 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."

The qualifier of 'your only son Isaac' is dubious at best, for we know that Abraham already had another son before Isaac, that is Ishmael. However, Ishmael and his mother Hagar were sent away with God's approval in the earlier chapter. So in a way, Isaac was the only son left.

Nevertheless, the qualifier 'whom you love' highlights what is at stake — Isaac, whom Abraham and Sarah had long awaited, long prayed for, represents the fulfillment of the covenantal promise of God. Isaac was treasured, protected and loved. Now God is demanding Abraham to give him up, as a sacrifice, a burnt offering to appease an all demanding God?

In face of such harsh and unreasonable demand, Abraham said not a peep. No bargaining for his son's life, as he had previously did so for his nephew Lot, who was residing in Sodom and Gomorrah, the two cities destined for destruction. No objecting to the practice of human sacrifice, a practice that may have been prevalent in the land of Canaan, but had never been required to worship the Lord God of Israel. No resisting an unreasonable demand that, if carried out in full, would certainly render God's covenant broken and null.

No, not a peep out of Abraham as he obediently packed for the journey, saddled his donkey, wood for burnt offering, two servants and of course Isaac. We, the readers of Genesis, know that it was a test, for the Scripture clearly states it so, right from the beginning. But did Abraham know it too? Hold that thought as we come to the second 'Here I am' uttered by Abraham.

As they approached the mountain, the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." Not only is Abraham attentive to God, he is also attentive to his son. Listening to God and listening to people, particularly those closest to us, those whom we love, are not mutually exclusive. Obeying God does not mean one needs to check one's brain, one's moral and ethical obligation at the door.

Coming back to Isaac, he acutely observed, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" (v.7) Ah, a good

question. Questioning is an essential part of faith, for without a healthy dose of questioning, faith is stagnant, stale, and unable to grow.

I once attended a bible study in my early days. The pastor leading the study took issue with my mother's questioning of the Scripture text. You got to know that my mom is an amazing woman of faith, who had endured and overcame much hardship in life. Yet her faith is always vibrant and alive. Oh, she is also not afraid to ask tough theological questions when occasion demands. Facing my mother's persistent questioning (to be honest I don't even recall what the issue was), that pastor was getting exasperated. In the end, running out of answers, he could only bang his divine gavel and said something to the effect that 'God does not look kindly to those who doubt!' I will always remember that encounter, as a reminder to myself, to never shut down a healthy debate in a bible study. For faith and doubt are and should be paradoxically held together in tension, for that's a beautiful thing.

Facing the question from Isaac: "Where is the lamb?" Abraham simply replied, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." Was Abraham lying to Isaac, placating his son in order to secure his compliance? I don't think so. For in this answer, we get a glimpse of the extend of Abraham's faith. Though he may not understand why God was asking him to do the impossible, a thing that is no good, but he trust in the goodness of God, that ultimately God will provide.

Fides quaerens intellectum, or "faith seeking understanding" is a phrase attributed to Anselm of Canterbury, the great 11th century theologian of the Catholic Church. Anselm uses this expression to articulate the close relationship between faith and human reason, as he wrote "I do not seek to understand in order that I may believe, but rather, I believe in order that I may understand."

I think that perfectly captures the faith that Abraham has in God. The starting point of faith is to believe. It is then ground through the crucible of life, as in the case of Abraham, through foreign countries, spousal mishaps, battles, rescue, circumcision, family ugliness, bargaining for mercy, and a son lost to exile. Through all these, Abraham learned to trust God, and to understand God's ways.

So, when Abraham and Isaac came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar, he bound his son and laid him on the altar of wood. It's a horrifying yet beautiful picture. Horrifying because of what was about to take place. Beautiful because Isaac trusted his father, Abraham

trusted God. Both crying out in their hearts: Jehovah Jireh, “the Lord will provide”.

As Abraham raised his knife hand and about to deliver the coup de grâce, the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, twice, showing utmost urgency, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, for the third and final time, “Here I am.” The attentiveness that Abraham had shown to both God and Isaac finds its resolution in a ram (not a lamb), caught in a thicket by its horns. Yes indeed, God provided.

The Apostle Paul, wrote to the church in Rome, in Romans chapter 6. Though not naming Abraham’s faith in particular, his argument is nevertheless enlightening. Paul begins “When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness.” (free as in not having any part in) He then asks, “So what fruit did you then gain from the things of which you now are ashamed?” For the end of those things is none other than death itself.

The following then is the real interesting part, “But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God.” Enslaved to God!? There is no hint that Paul thinks being enslaved to God is a bad thing. Rather, the fruits of that slavery lead us to sanctification and to eternal life.

Should we apply that thinking to the story in Genesis 22, then this story which is often referred to as the ‘Binding of Isaac’ really should be understood as Abraham binding himself to God, as he freely enslaved himself, in a ongoing relationship to Lord God of Israel.

The obedience of Isaac in accepting the binding of his father, and of Abraham in bidding himself to his father in heaven, reminds us of the obedience of Christ on the cross. For two thousands years after Abraham, on the hill of Golgotha, also called Calvary, on top of mount Jerusalem, God provided his own son Jesus, as a sacrifice for the whole humanity. No angel of the Lord came to stop that offering, no ram could ever substitute the Lamb of God. It was not a test, for it was necessary for the redemption of humanity, of you and I.

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Thanks be to God.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.